

THE
ESOTERRORISTS
WORLD BREAKER
BY ROBIN D LAWS



Pelgrane Press

THE TEARING OF THE VEIL IS NIGH

AN APPALLING SUMMONING...

DEMONS OF THE DEPTHS, AWAKENED...

SLAUGHTER ON YOUR MAPPING APP...

EBOLA INSURGENCY...

...AND, OF COURSE, MURDER CLOWNS

For decades, the Ordo Veritatis has fought the occult operations of the Esoterrorists, occult operatives bent on ripping apart the membrane between our reality and the demonic vortex of the Outer Dark.

Now that threat directly looms. A barbaric ritual in an underground club touches off a series of coordinated assaults designed to break our world forever.

In this world-spanning campaign of interlocking scenarios, your agents conduct the high-stakes investigations required to stop them.

Until now, Esoterror's cosmic endgame has been described in background material but never taken center stage in adventures your agents can take part in.

They've read the training manuals. They've attended the briefings. Now it's time to deploy their knowledge in the field, staking life, limb and mental stability against those who would destroy everything we know.

After a gore-spattered prologue, *Worldbreaker* gives your players the choice of four harrowing scenarios they can tackle in any order.

From caverns deep below Belize to an arm's dealers warehouse in Transnistria, from Silicon Valley offices to haunted, rebel-held forests of Nigeria, your agents unravel the schemes of monsters both metaphorical and literal. Battle deconstructed animals, opportunistic demons, body-stealing parasites and otherworldly PR agents.

Put together the pieces leading to the climactic intervention against the conspiracy's mastermind and the mightiest, most destructive Outer Dark Entity to ever squeeze through a hole between realms.

All adventures written by Robin D. Laws, creator of GUMSHOE and the Esoterror setting.

**CAN YOU KEEP THE WORLD UNBROKEN?
AND HOW MANY AGENTS WILL YOU LOSE ALONG THE WAY?**

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GUMSHOE


WORLDBREAKER

BY ROBIN D. LAWS



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BREAKING THE WORLD

PREVIOUS SCENARIOS FOR *THE ESOTERRORISTS* HAVE FUNCTIONED AS standalones. *Worldbreaker* presents our first globe-spanning series of linked adventures, in which the team pieces together a conspiracy poised to rip open the membrane in a single worldwide panic event.

It kicks off with **Into the Basement**. This prologue, below, introduces the global plot and allows players to choose which of four episodes they investigate first.

Those four episodes are:

Coulrophobia: A global fad in which pranksters pose as sinister clowns takes on an Esoterror cast when unlucky drivers who see them start losing control and crashing. With incidents popping up all over, how does the team find and destroy the cell at the root of the scheme?

Geoslashers: The camera vehicles used to create street views for the Internet's top mapping site happen upon a series of murder scenes. Though apparently unconnected at first, the incidents spark international unease as the string of supposed coincidences wears on. Can the team suss out the hidden unity behind the killings?

New Crystal Maiden: Worldwide exposure to Outer Dark phenomena threatens when a reality TV show decides to send spelunkers into a newly discovered deep complex near Belize's famed Actun Tunichil Muknal caves. Agents infiltrate the cast and crew to squelch whatever lurks below.

Heart of Outer Darkness: The team follows the trail of a woman possessed by a parasitic ODE to the unrecognized Eastern European nation of Transnistria. Her deal to purchase arms from a local weapons magnate takes them to Liberia, and then to Nigeria, and finally into the maddening grip of a Mystery Man. Stakes don't get higher than an Esoterror effort to equip the fanatic terrorist sect of Boko Haram with Ebola grenades.

These four scenarios lay the groundwork for the ultimate threat:

Swallowed: The disappearance of a jumbo jet over the Pacific becomes international news, inspiring all sorts of nutjob conspiracy theories. The team must take what it's learned from the previous scenarios to locate the uncharted island where an enormous Outer Dark Entity is aborning. When its spawning is complete, its birth will destroy the membrane forever. Can they destroy it before it consumes the last of the passengers, becoming unstoppable and ending life as we know it?

Each of the first four mysteries includes not only the clues needed to solve the immediate case, but also pipe clues affecting the outcome of the final mystery in **Swallowed**. We'll call them out in greater detail as we go along, but for ease of reference the table below contains point-form versions.

TIMELINES, OR THE ABSENCE THEREOF

To allow the players to choose which chapters they tackle and in which order, only one of them, "Coulrophobia," has them racing against the clock of a specific antagonist timeline. The others adjust themselves to player choices in the time-honored fashion of serialized horror procedurals. You never see Mulder and Scully or the Winchester brothers arrive too late to do anything but mop up the carnage of a long-completed villain plot, and that doesn't happen here, either. For this reason there is no universal way for the background actions of the antagonists of the four middle chapters and the climax to interlock. The order of their machinations will vary from one run of this series to the next.


EPISODE PIPE CLUE FOR "SWALLOWED"

Coulrophobia Identity protocols allowing the team to pose as members of an allied cell expected on the island

Geoslashers ODE-attracting crystals that can be used to dispatch the scenario's big bad entity

New Crystal Maiden Evidence that the Esoterrorists are gathering blood of ODE victims

Heart of Outer Darkness Opportunity to meet Ellis Sherman, chief antagonist of "Swallowed"



PROLOGUE: INTO THE BASEMENT

A WALK-AND-TALK BRIEFING AND AN INITIAL SCENE OF HORROR USHER the unsuspecting team into the biggest case they've ever tackled.

MEET AT THE LUGGAGE CAROUSEL

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-OUT: The Horror at the Foot of the Stairs

The action starts in the baggage area of San Francisco International Airport. They've been summoned on particularly short notice, a sign that they can be expected to be inserted into a situation already in progress. Bleary travelers stagger about the lounge like zombies with carry-on. Team members, arriving from their disparate home locations, have been instructed to gather at a particular luggage carousel, where flyers on a red-eye from Washington, DC, await their checked suitcases.

If this is the first session of your series, have the players describe their characters and make in-dialogue introductions.

The buzzer sounds. Luggage starts to flow along the conveyor belt. The team has been briefed to look for a person pulling a green suitcase with an *X* of yellow duct tape from the carousel. This will be their Mr. Verity. A harried-looking, middle-aged African American woman who also happens to be a dwarf grabs

the case matching this description and makes a beeline for them. Play her as nervous, talking in a clipped rapid fire. Consider using a handkerchief as a prop, mopping your brow as you speak her dialogue.

Depending on what you find more natural, either paraphrase the following or deliver it as written:

- ▶ “We got a hot scene on our hands, people. Our local assets ID-ed it as Esoterror soon as first responders showed up. We have it locked down but won't be able to hold off civilian law enforcement indefinitely. Our job is to assess the scene, neutralize lingering threats if any, extract information, then veil the sucker out.”
- ▶ She provides the team initial cover identifying them as FBI agents. Should they need to switch cover as they enter other jurisdictions, they need merely specify how they want to be accredited and head office will make the necessary arrangements.

Mr. Verity then directs the group toward the pick-up area outside, where a black SUV awaits. In response to specific queries she supplies the following. (Reword to fit the questions.)

- ▶ The crime scene is a kink club called The Basement.
- ▶ She doesn't want to prejudice their forensic assessments by describing what they can expect to see there in any detail.



- ▶ The scene has been held pending their arrival. It took a day to assemble the team and get them here. (A normal criminal investigation wouldn't leave bodies that long but a normal criminal investigation this isn't.)
- ▶ A Veil-Out plan has already been chosen, and will be revealed to them in the fullness of time.
- ▶ The scene was discovered yesterday afternoon (about twenty-four hours ago) by a beer delivery man named Wendell Sanders. He kept it together long enough to dial 911. By the time cops arrived, they found him babbling incoherently. Sanders has been moved to the psych ward of San Francisco General Hospital. The team can debrief him if it wants. However, it doesn't look like he could give up anything of interest even if he was capable of stringing sentences together.

If any of the characters make stupid remarks about her dwarfism, Mr. Verity shoots them your very best withering look.

THE HORROR AT THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Meet at the Luggage Carousel

LEAD-OUTS: Back at the Lab, Perfect Family

The SUV sweeps the characters, with Mr. Verity along for the ride, from the airport to the city's Dogpatch district.

Forensic Accounting: Like its more famous counterpart, the Tenderloin, this formerly skeezy neighborhood has gentrified considerably in recent years.

Still the driver manages to find a desolate stretch of dilapidated warehouses. He parks outside the most anonymous of them. Only a small hand-painted wooden sign over a back entrance reveals it as The Basement.

The building has been crime-taped off. SFPD officers stand guard outside. Their knowing postures suggest that they're local assets, or Ordo support cleared to pose as San Francisco cops.

Mr. Verity tells them to get out their flashlights. They've left the scene as pristine as possible for their investigation, and so have not yet located the light switch for the wooden set of stairs leading below the main building.

(At this point you might want to find the cover image for the game's first edition and hold it up for the group on a laptop or tablet. Yes, they're re-enacting this iconic image.)

Red lightbulbs bathe a scene of appalling carnage. Gore drenches the bare concrete walls of a BDSM playroom. Dismembered bodies of several dozen naked or leather-clad victims lie in a heap in the middle of the floor. Suspended above them are six sets of chains dangling from a ceiling beam overhead. Each holds a severed head, impaled on a hook.

Evidence Collection: Except for the copious blood on them, the hooks look newer than the chains, as if freshly purchased for the occasion. This suggests that the assailants brought their own hooks and attached them to the club's already hanging chains.

Street clothes lie in a pile off in a corner. Wallets and purses sit jumbled among them, partially emptied of their contents. They still contain money and credit cards, ruling out theft as a motive.

Along one wall sits an old couch. On it, also dead, froth flecking their lips and throats, a very different group of people huddle together. All are fully clothed, in the generic outfits of

straight-arrow suburbia. The man in the center of the huddle, about forty years old, sandy of hair and square of jaw, wears a pastel yellow polo shirt with a company logo on it, along with khaki pants, Dockers shoes, and white sport socks. The woman beside him, around his age, wears a frilly white blouse and high-waisted acid-wash mom jeans. A skinny boy in his late teens also wears jeans, along with a Taylor Swift T-shirt. A blonde girl a couple of years younger than him wears a pink top and striped skirt. Off to one side slumps a bespectacled, white-haired woman in her early sixties, in a cotton blouse and blue polyester slacks. Blood covers all of them from head to toe. At the presumed grandmother's feet, a vacuum flask lies on its side, spilling a liquid that looks like a brightly colored sports drink.

Forensic Anthropology estimates time of death for all victims as approximately 36 hours ago.

Chemistry: It is a popular sports drink, all right — heavily laced with diazepam (a sedative, best known as Valium) and strychnine.

A freshly purchased rucksack lies beside the couch. Inside it the team finds an assortment of knives and saws, a pair of pistols, and three assault rifles.

(alternate core) **Evidence Collection:** Tucked away into a rucksack pocket is a smartphone in a pink plastic case with cat ears.

Forensic Psychology: Looks like the daughter couldn't bear to be separated from her phone, even on the day of her family's suicidal kill-spree.

Though passcoded, **Data Retrieval** allows access to the phone's contents. There's nothing on it that wouldn't be found on the phone of a popular high school girl. However, after some basic searches, it does allow the team to identify the family as the Powells, of Irvine, CA: Robert (dad), Donna (mom), Gloria Barnes (Donna's mother), Marshall (son) and Emily (daughter).

Ballistics: The long guns are civilian grade AR-15 assault rifles. Later **Research** shows that all of the firearms present were legally purchased in Arizona and New Mexico by Powell over a period of years. A member in good standing of the NRA, his credit card history indicates a lifelong interest in guns.

Ballistics: Guns require more effort to procure in California than in other nearby states. It could be that the Outer Dark targeted the Powells for indoctrination partly on the basis of Dad's existing munitions supply.

This murder scene staggers even seasoned homicide detectives. Seeing it calls for Stability tests: Difficulty 4, potential loss 5.

Now that the group has surveyed the scene, Mr. Verity reveals the Veil-Out, which will be taken care of by others. The scene will be rejiggered to cast it as an ordinary murder spree by the husband alone. They'll locate the family home and make it seem as if he annihilated his relatives before leaving for San Francisco to complete his campaign against sex perverts. The cover story will still be horrible enough to receive international media coverage and thin the membrane. But with so many dead, it's the best they can do. Letting the full facts get out would do far worse damage.

CARD READER

The Basement issued exclusive ID key cards to its clients. The smashed and melted remains of a portable card reader, along with a pile of melted plastic cards, lie burned in a pile on the floor, along with paper ash.

Document Analysis: The burned paper, some of it plasticized, indicates that these are destroyed passports.

SMARTPHONES

In the club office near the computer the investigators find a small lock box.

Ballistics: Its lock has been shot off by a pistol. Smartphones spill from it. **Anthropology** suggests that the club probably required all participants to surrender their phones for the duration of the party. It contains five fewer phones than victims.

One phone can be found on the body of the apparent proprietor, which unlike that of the party-goers remains semi-clothed. It identifies him as Byron Pierce, 45. Among its contacts app an investigator finds the numbers of many clients listed by code name only: Flower, Mystic, King Henry, Super Fly and the like.

It also contains the number of Elite Limo Services. Its owner, a polished sort named Lindsey Stevens, resists efforts to reveal anything about her clients, who insist on confidentiality. **Bureaucracy** or **Reassurance** prompts her to confirm that the club uses her fleet of vehicles to ferry people from local hotels to the club. This explains the lack of client vehicles in nearby lots: cars were hired to bring them here. Stevens confirms that she was expecting Pierce to call her for a fleet of limos to pick up his guests, expressing annoyance over the lost business.

The phone supplies Pierce's home address on nearby Missouri Street. A search of his home turns up nothing useful to the case.

THE FOOTAGE

► (core) **Electronic Surveillance:** Carefully hidden pinhead cameras can be found embedded in two of the walls. Wires connect them to a computer and hard drive in the adjoining room.

This next room is an office, like that of any small business, unless you count the hardcore images displayed on the walls.

► **Forensic Accounting:** Hardcopy release forms, indicating that the clients consented to be filmed, lie strewn around the office. There are five fewer release forms present than victims.

A check of the computer shows that the videos were not publicly distributed. Instead the proprietors provided them to clients as souvenirs, in exchange for a modest fee.

The cameras captured the carnage in its entirety.

The group may decide to take the footage and watch it back at the lab; in that case, adjust this description as needed.

- ▶ **Forensic Psychology:** Before everyone watches the footage, it might be best to divide the job into shifts, so no one investigator sees more than a portion of it. Otherwise everyone faces maximum risk of PTSD — which given what they've already seen, could well prove considerable.

If the players choose to do this, you might emphasize this by bringing each of them into a separate room to supply a single chunk of the description given below. This requires the players to compare notes, just like the characters would. Do this not to conceal information, which they'll share immediately anyway, but to drive home the horrific gravity of the video's contents.

Watching all of the footage requires a Difficulty 6 Stability test, possible loss 6.

Watching a share of it knocks that down to Difficulty 4, loss 5.

The footage depicts the following:

- ▶ The clients, about two dozen of them, arrive in street clothes. They leave the play room for an adjoining room, then filter back in various stages of leathery undress.
- ▶ Awkwardly at first but then with increasing fervor, they get down to sex club business. Investigators unversed in the scene may be surprised by the lighthearted, almost giggly mood as the floggings commence and the restraints come out.
- ▶ A pounding comes from the upstairs door. The apparent club proprietor, in leather but fully clad, tries to ignore it but eventually disappears up the stairs. He's a portly, middle-aged man sporting a well-groomed beard, a peaked leather cap placed atop his shaved head.
- ▶ Sunlight floods the room. The proprietor reappears, held at gunpoint by the man from the couch.
- ▶ The other family members walk into frame, all of them armed: the adults with identical assault rifles, the teenage boy and girl with automatic pistols. They go about their tasks automatically, their expressions neutral, their voices calmly monotone.
 - ▶ **Forensic Psychology:** Though not hypnotized or sleepwalking, the family's emotional affect appears dulled. They're in control of their actions but barely respond to stimuli.
- ▶ The intruders point their guns at the clients, corralling them into a line against the wall. The clients' pleas for mercy register not at all on the family members' faces.
- ▶ They order the clients to go in pairs into the adjoining room and bring out their clothes and personal effects.
- ▶ The son and daughter find IDs for each client. They take special interest in the eight clients with foreign passports. (Apparently The Basement attracts visitors from all over the first world.)
- ▶ They also compare a photograph of a woman, printed out on a color inkjet, to the various female prisoners. Though it's hard to tell, they seem to be looking for the prisoner who most resembles the image.
 - ▶ Having finished their screening process, they order four of the swingers into the office.
 - ▶ They then gather up all the club ID cards plus all remaining passports. The son takes the portable card reader and smashes it. The family piles up the passports and cards and burns them, using a book of matches and a can of lighter fluid they get out of one of their rucksacks.
 - ▶ The son heads into the office, taking a USB stick out of his pocket.
 - ▶ The family then opens a rucksack full of knives and saws. The mother and daughter begin stabbing the remaining clients while the father and grandmother keep their weapons trained on the others. Realizing that they have little to lose, some of the remaining clients try to rush them. The father and grandmother mow them down until the rebellion stops. Then the others return to their stabbings.
 - ▶ Once they've murdered all the clients in the room, the family dismembers them, piling the body parts in a circle. They decapitate six of the clients, attach hooks to the chains, and hang the heads on the hooks.
 - ▶ The kids bring out the survivors they segregated in the office. Again they plead for mercy and are ignored. The family orders them to stand in the middle of the circle. With the grandmother keeping her rifle trained on the prisoners, the others strike up an eerie, guttural chant.
 - ▶ The video stutters and drops out as a weird distortion appears in the circle, around the surviving clients.
 - ▶ **Occult Studies:** This is unprecedented: a fissure in the membrane, caught on video! Long term, it offers the Ordo untold potential for research. Short term, it's bone chilling.
 - ▶ From the distortion, four slug-like shapes coalesce. They plop down onto the blood-slicked floor. Before crawling up the legs of the survivors, one apiece, they pause to lick at the blood.
 - ▶ They slither up the prisoners' bodies, disappearing into their mouths.
 - ▶ The posture of the prisoners shifts, to a stiff, puppeted gait.
 - ▶ The teenage boy gives each prisoner a folder. The prisoners, who do seem hypnotized or otherwise stripped of volition, calmly read the contents, which include documents and images.
 - ▶ **Data Retrieval:** Freeze-framing and enhancement should reveal some of the contents of the folders.
 - ▶ Once they're finished reading, the prisoners step out of the circle. The family makes no move to stop them. They coolly get dressed. Then each of them in turn hugs each of the intruders.
 - ▶ The released prisoners head toward the stairs and out of frame.
 - ▶ The family then gets the vacuum flask out of the rucksack. They sit together on the couch as if blissfully watching television together, passing and drinking from the flask. Almost immediately they slump together, pass out, and die, froth pouring from their lips.

VEHICLE CANVASS

In addition to Emily's cellphone, the group can also identify the Powells by canvassing area parking lots for unclaimed vehicles. They locate a seven-year-old champagne-colored Chevy Suburban registered to Robert Powell, with address information leading to their Irvine home. At your discretion the car may provide alternate ways of conveying information found in this scene or in "Perfect Family," p. 10.

They also find a customized hearse belonging to the club proprietor, Byron Pierce. Agents can ID him from the car if they don't locate his phone (described below).

Investigators find none of the victims' vehicles nearby. As explained below, clients used a limo service sourced by Byron to get to the club.

- ▶ The video continues for hours, with nothing happening, until the beer delivery man arrives. He tentatively pokes his head into the room, falls against the wall, manages to call 911, drops the phone, and curls into a near-fetal position in one of the few unbloodied bits of concrete flooring.
- ▶ Then the video ends, as the file reaches its maximum size.

The adjoining room the clients went into is easily located. It contains banks of small lockers, their doors swinging wide, their shelves empty.

The agents may hope to find the names of the four missing clients on the computer's hard drive. **Data Retrieval** lets the team's keyboard jockey call up the interface program that logged IDs from the portable card reader. Unfortunately four of the names have been scrambled into a weird alphabet. **Cryptography** indicates that these come from a work by pioneering Renaissance cryptographer Johannes Trithemius. However, they appear to have been assigned at random, as an occult-inflected "up yours" to Ordo investigators attempting to find the names of the possession subjects. If players can think of other places on the hard drive where the names ought to appear, they find them likewise scrambled. A font called Trithemius has been freshly installed in the computer. Any attempt to crack the font's code triggers a fearsome image of an unidentified ODE torturing a victim. The character seeing this must make a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 2 points.

A USB stick still juts from a port on the front of the computer. When opened it contains not circuitry but fibrous, warty tissue. **Pathology** finds it to be of unearthly origin, matching other samples of undifferentiated ODE biological material on file in various Ordo labs. This is the Outer Dark's version of a computer virus.

Astute players may reason that, if the kid knew about the videos at all, he chose to leave them in order to mess with investigators' heads.

Speaking of which...

MR. VERITY LOSES IT

As their investigation of the crime scene starts to wind down, Mr. Verity wanders over to the bag containing the family's weapons. She picks up one of the pistols and puts the barrel in her mouth.

A Difficulty 4 **Athletics** test allows a character to get to her and wrestle the gun away. If no one tries or the first test fails, she blows the back of her head off.

On a success, the team can arrange for an Ordo psychiatric services team to extract her to its long term care facility, code-named Installation Spaniard.

BLOOD CORPSES?

If you feel while playing this scene that it could do with an infusion of direct menace, the heaped body parts twitch, gain animation, and assemble themselves into blood corpses. The number of blood corpses equals the size of the team.

These zombie-like entities rampage insatiably for human blood, consuming it through hollow claws, which function as both rending weapon and feeding tubule. Stability loss from seeing them is 4, Difficulty 4.

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -1

WEAPON: +1 (talons)

ARMOR: +2 vs. Shooting

BACK AT THE LAB

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Horror at the Foot of the Stairs, Perfect Family

LEAD-OUTS: Perfect Family; Coulrophobia, Geoslashers, New Crystal Maiden, Heart of Outer Darkness

The team can use its impeccably falsified Ordo-supplied credentials to gain access to the SFPD's fully equipped forensic video lab.

Data Retrieval allows them to grab and enhance frames from the moments where the slug-possessed victims study the contents of their folders.

- ▶ (core clue for "Coulrophobia") *Folder one*, perused by a tall man in his fifties with Nordic features. It included instructions listing a series of flights the recipient is presumably expected to book. The only one that can be made out goes from San Francisco to Newark airport in New Jersey. Also visible: a photograph of a man in a clown costume, at night, standing next to a highway exit sign for Bayonne, New Jersey.
- ▶ (core clue for "Geoslashers") *Folder two*, held by a broad-shouldered woman in her mid-thirties, contains a corporate-looking ID access badge (company logo unfortunately

irretrievable), part of the newspaper article appearing as Geoslashers Handout #1, on p. 49, and a plastic baggie full of a red material resembling crystal meth. The woman's dark hair and olive complexion would allow her to pass as a citizen of many nations, from the Latin world to Italy, the Middle East and beyond. This is the victim the attackers chose by comparing her to a printed-out photo.

- ▶ (core clue for "New Crystal Maiden") *Folder three*, in the hands of a bald man of Chinese extraction in his late thirties, contains a picture of a crystallized skeleton.
- ▶ (core clue for "Heart of Outer Darkness") *Folder four*, studied by a slim, pale-skinned young woman who wears her hair in a ponytail, includes a business card for a car service located in Chisinau, Moldova, and a black vape pen with a logo and some writing on it. Magnified, the pen can be seen to contain a wolf's head logo, and the words **ВОЛК ДЕН**.
- ▶ **Languages (Russian):** This translates as "Wolf's Den."

Attempts to use facial recognition software to identify the possession victims garner zero hits. From this they can conclude that none of them were in the database.

- ▶ **Cop Talk:** The four subjects must have clean records, never having come to the attention of any law enforcement or intelligence agency. As jet-setting kinksters, they are no doubt used to presenting themselves to border officials as bland and uninteresting.

Enough time has passed since the killings that the four will have cleared the San Francisco airport and most likely their final destinations as well.

Mr. Verity asks the investigators which of the four leads they want to follow next. She indicates that teams will be dispatched to hunt down the other three leads. However, in the interest of maintaining investigative continuity, they'll hang back and take a passive information-gathering role. Only if the situation escalates into an immediate threat will these support teams intervene.

In other words, GMCs aren't going to finish all of the other scenarios before the players can get to them.

Break the fourth wall, if necessary, to make it clear to players that the four folders lead to separate investigations. Though they connect into a larger whole, mixing them into one sprawling investigation will be too confusing to manage.

Later, whenever they start another of the scenarios and check in to see what the backup teams have found, they discover that nothing has turned up and they're basically starting from scratch.

If Mr. Verity has already killed herself or been carted off for psychiatric treatment, a new Mr. Verity shows up to pick up where she left off. This Mr. Verity is a rumpled man near retirement age who gives off the tweedy air of academia.

Depending on where the conversation goes, he may indicate that he was pulled from inactive duty for this sudden substitution.

PERFECT FAMILY

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Horror at the Foot of the Stairs, Back at the Lab

LEAD-OUTS: Back at the Lab; Coulrophobia, Geoslashers, New Crystal Maiden, Heart of Outer Darkness

The Powells live at 62 Copernicus Lane in the ultra-suburban Turtle Rock neighborhood of Irvine, CA, a day's drive from the site of the murders.

Architecture: The neighborhood gets its name from winding streets designed to resemble a turtle shell in map view.

Trivia: This placid, upscale area delivers a solid Republican vote in any election.

The Powells locked their home up tight before departing. Search warrant in hand, the team can easily circumvent the consumer-grade locks with police-issue lock picks.

The family left the house in eerily tidy condition. Its pleasantly appointed interior betrays no overt sign of Esoterica interests.

After a search, only two things stand out as bizarre.

One, the Powells have filled their freezer and refrigerator with inexpertly skinned and butchered animal parts. **Natural History:** These include multiple house cats, a German shepherd, a Pomeranian, a bag of chipmunks, and a coyote.

Two, young Marshall's computer oozes with formless biological matter. Pink fleshy cilia dangle from its vents, ports, and CD tray. The creature inside the tower case hisses and trembles if the appendages are handled.

COMPUTER CRUD CREATURE

Later, in a lab with a sample of tendrill tissue, **Pathology** reveals it as not of this earth — entirely different amino acids comprise its equivalent of DNA. The cells lack mitochondria.

Needless to say, the creature inside is an Outer Dark Entity. Opening the case enrages it, prompting it to spray a toxic goo at the closest team member. It then attempts to scuttle on multiple scorpion-like legs into the house's central air conditioning system.

The target investigator tests **Athletics** (Difficulty 4) to avoid being hit by the goo. If hit, the victim loses 3 Health and 1 Stability at the beginning of each of the next three scenes.

The other team members can make an attempt apiece to catch the creature before it reaches the vent. Any **Athletics/Scuffling** result of 5 or more with a suitable weapon reduces it to paste. Any credibly described capture attempt catches it alive. A player may spend a mix of **Athletics** or **Scuffling** on the test. Every time a team member looks closely at the captured, living creature requires a Stability test: Difficulty 3, potential loss 3. Protocol tells them to call in a containment team to remove it to an Ordo facility for study.



Players may wonder why this bit short-hands the combat rules. If so, explain that it doesn't rise to the level of a full-on fight. Taking it out is more like killing a skunk or other small animal.

The creature cannot directly communicate with team members.

Certain of its orifices resemble USB ports. If a USB–USB cable is inserted into it and into a laptop, the creature can take over the computer and flash disturbing images on the monitor. If interrogated in this way, it tries to create the impression that it will reveal something useful. Really it just wants to drive the team insane. Asking it questions and looking at the images it flashes costs Stability as follows:

1st **image:** Difficulty 3, loss 2

3rd **image:** Difficulty 4, loss 4

6th **image:** Difficulty 5, loss 6

... and so on.

HARD DRIVE CONTENTS

1-point **Data Retrieval** spend: Prolonged contact with the creature has scrambled the drive, but the information on it can be partially reassembled with heroic restoration methods. Its contents allow the group to piece together the following narrative:

- ▶ Marshall became the vector of Esoterror influence on the household as his Internet searches took him first from harmless UFO and paranormal research, down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theory, into fringe racism, and finally into Darknet forums allowing communication across the membrane with actual ODEs.
- ▶ The ODEs convinced him that he and his family had a destiny to change the world.
- ▶ They gave him links to slideshows that would bring the rest of his family around to the mission. (Perhaps fortunately the mind-altering slideshows are irretrievable.)
- ▶ They then taught the family the ritual for summoning symps, slug-like parasitic ODEs who take over human bodies and can then proceed to perform complex tasks.

- ▶ (pipe clue for “Coulrophobia”) An intriguing fragment of text in an otherwise scrambled Word document entitled ClownOp.docx reads as follows:

drawback of using gigglers: cack one as it materializes and all others get banished

- ▶ (pipe clue for “Geoslashers”) The following journal entry:

Holy shit I gotta find a new place to synthesize the red!!! OMFG last night SOMETHING broke into the chem lab and turned the custodian into paste. That what the poor bastard gets for letting me steal and copy the keys off of him, I guess. I nearly slipped in a puddle of blood and teeth on the way in. GROSS!! I should not have to deal with this!! It took me all night to clean up the pulped remains and every scrap of clothing I was wearing had to be burnt up. A couple of months ago Dad woulda grounded me but now he understands and helped me bleach out the spatters I dropped in the garage.

What I'm afraid to tell him is on the way back, after I gathered up what was left of Mr. Santiago and had him in tubs, I naturally also cleared out the rest of the red. And as I was getting in the car, I felt this, like **presence** on the back of my neck. Like breath, but cold. And not like cold temperature cold but cold spiritually, like a world that didn't belong here was intruding on me. And I turned around and there glaring at me snot and drool coming out of this enormous lamprey mouth was this giant creature. I didn't have to be a brain surgeon to figure out it was the thing that killed Mr. Santiago. Standing there snurfling and hungry and looking at me like I was every item on the menu at Applebee's.

Now in the front of my brain, all I was thinking was that that thing was going to eat me. And I tried to mentally talk to it. Like “hey we're on the same side I'm working with you guys.” And maybe I kind a got through to it because it hesitated. Then I looked down into my hand at the Ziploc baggie and see the red. In the back of my brain I'm apparently still capable of thinking and so I throw the Baggie. It flies up into the air and gets caught on the top of the chain-link fence on the spiky part. And the demon creature thing runs up and tries to jump up on the fence and knocks the fence down. And that gives me the time I need to jump in the car and tool and out of there. I don't know whether it got anybody else. I guess I'll have to watch the news ha ha.

Document Analysis: comparing this with other innocuous documents on the hard drive which are clearly written by Marshall Powell show his authorship of this fragment.

A trip to the fence finds a damaged section of chain-link fence. **Chemistry** shows that it has been corroded by a powerful acid. **Pathology** finds traces of unearthly DNA confirming the presence of an ODE. It matches no DNA samples from identified ODEs in the Ordo database, but that's not surprising — the organization has very few of these on file.

Research: Eusebio Santiago, 63, a custodian at Marshall Powell's high school, has been listed as a missing person for the last seven weeks. He was last seen leaving home for his night shift at the school. That night at the school, vandals tore some of the fencing down. The newspaper account of his disappearance treats this as a lead of unspecified import, implying that a run-in with vandals might have led to foul play.

- ▶ (pipe clue for "New Crystal Maiden") The following text from a book, as found in a digital photograph:

Padre Juan Saldivar, in writings suppressed by the Vatican, recorded the testimony of Mayans who claimed that their ancestors sacrificed not only to the beings they recognized as gods, but to cruel spirits who dwelt in caves. His primary informant was a woman named Ixtab, who said she knew the true stories the priests feared to recount. In the common Creation Myths of the Mayans, seven gods, including the Sky Heart and the Feathered Serpent, need beings who can keep the time and feed the universe the blood energy needed to fuel itself. To this end, after repeated failed attempts, they fashion heroic twins, who they send down into the Underworld to battle the lords of death. Emerging triumphant, they become the sun and the moon.

Ixtab (with whom he was later accused of having relations, breaking his priestly vows) told Saldivar that in reality the gods made three beings of light, Heroic Triplets, one of whom burned even brighter than the others. It was his very brightness that led to his demise, for when he entered the Underworld, his light entered the cave spirits, granting them strength. His fear fed them, becoming the sperm that fertilized them, and the eggs from which they hatched. The younger brothers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, gave their elder brother to the cave beings and fled. In their terror they never told the gods what had happened to the brightest brother. Nor did the gods, sore afraid themselves, closely inquire. Instead they let Hunahpu and Xbalanque foster the race of humans and retreat to the sky. Never did they suspect that they made them as food for the cave spirits, or that the third brother to this day remains beneath the earth, suffering tortures unimaginable, new cave spirits born daily from his viscera.

As this story appears nowhere else in the annals, one must be cautious in imputing to it any

(pipe clue for "Heart of Outer Darkness") A portion of a 3-D schematic for a strange device that looks like an asymmetrical grenade covered in weird, creepy decorative elements, like spikes, nails, and what look like lizard vertebrae. **Explosive Devices:** It's a gas grenade, designed to aerosolize and disperse a small packet of material. That material could, for example, be a biological agent.

OTHER CLUES

An erased whiteboard stands on an easel in the family rec room. **Chemistry** allows some of the text to be recovered. Along with shopping lists and innocuous scheduling notes for family activities, it includes the following point form notes:

- ▶ Need worldwide victims
- ▶ Frequent travelers
- ▶ Low suspicion
- ▶ Travel on down low, not quickly missed
- ▶ Sex tourists
- ▶ SAN FRANCISCO — THE BASEMENT

Robert keeps a home office. A search plus **Forensic Accounting** reveal that he owned a number of car dealerships and several franchised chain restaurant locations, and that he sold all of them for cash over the past few months. He then laundered this perfectly legal money into a profusion of off-shore accounts — suggesting that he's making it available to confederates, possibly unknown to him. **Forensic Accounting** can identify some but not all of these accounts. The team can alert Ordo HQ, flagging the accounts so that anyone trying to access them can be apprehended and brought in for questioning.

(Further into this cycle of scenarios, when the team needs a boost, inform them that the Ordo has intercepted a suspect in Ankara withdrawing money from one of the accounts. Searching his apartment, a team dispatched to Turkey found the makings of a dirty bomb in his apartment.)

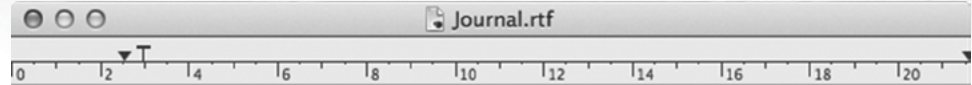
CAPTURING A SYMP

The team's likeliest occasion to capture a symp happens during "Geoslashers." Accordingly, notes on how to deal with this are found there, on p. 39. Refer to that section if players surprise you by steering the story there at another point in the series.

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INTO THE BASEMENT / HANDOUT 2

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COULROPHOBIA

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ITS SYMP, THE FIRST OF THE PARASITIZED, unwilling Esoterror assets turns a sinister clown-themed prank into a global story set to metastasize into violence and madness. The team must catch the victim and end the scheme before it pokes a permanent hole in the membrane.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

The ultimate authors of the conspiracy are Outer Dark Entities who reached across the membrane to contact the Powell family and set a globe-spanning scheme in motion.

Prime mover is the symp, inhabiting the body of Nikolaj Damgaard, a Copenhagen lobbyist. Symps don't have names, so we'll call this SympOne. It takes a loosely affiliated group of would-be pranksters and encourages them in their campaign of creepy clown stunts. SympOne starts with their instigator, Zach Moreno, of Bayonne, NJ, then draws in Des Watson of Leicester, UK, and Dario Fratelli of Pordenone, Italy. It intends to recruit them to provide menial assistance in the tearing of the membrane set to take place during the events of "Swallowed." The unease generated by their more immediate efforts allow ODEs called gigglers to leak into the world and wreak murderous havoc.

TRAIL OF CLUES

The team starts either by trying to find the person responsible for a previous wave of **Clown Sightings** or engaging in the much harder task of **Pursuing Damgaard**. They discover that **Zach Moreno** is behind the New Jersey incidents, then learn of the **Leicester Outbreak**. By finding **Des Watson**, they can discover an Esoterror cell ready to jump in to escalate incidents initiated by others, or head off to stop the **Pordenone Incidents** in their tracks. There they might have the chance to interrupt a **Giggler Crucible** and put an end to the global pattern before it replicates elsewhere.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

While the team is still in New Jersey, gigglers appear and cause the first of a series of **One-Car Murders**. Later incidents might include parallel **Leicester Murders** and **Pordenone Murders**. Under certain circumstances gigglers might try to make the team their next victims.



SCENES

CLOWN SIGHTINGS

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-OUTS: Pursuing Damgaard, Zach Moreno, One-Car Murders

Research reveals the source of the clown costume photo freeze-framed in the video footage of folder one (“Back in the Lab,” p. 9). It ran in the newspaper the *New Jersey Leader* and on its website last May, on the 30th. The accompanying article appears as Coulrophobia Handout #1, p. 29.

A second article follows on June 7; this is Coulrophobia Handout #2.

The team gets these articles as soon as they look for them. During the team’s flight to Newark, the *Examiner* posts a fresh article, Coulrophobia Handout #3.

Using the articles as a springboard, agents can begin their hunt for the people behind the clown sightings. These will unfold as a series of short interview scenes separated in space and time, which we’ll place under a single umbrella heading, to keep the focus clear.

JULIE CHIN

An alert, put-together and ambitious young reporter who views the Bayonne beat as a mere apprenticeship, Julie quickly seizes on any chance that this clown story might take on a bigger profile than she initially assumed. When team members ask her questions, she turns it around on them and tries to find out who they are, what they know, and why they care. **Negotiation**, in which the team offers her information she can parlay into a juicy story, prompts her to open up. (Of course any scoops they eventually feed her will have to be false.) She doesn’t know who the clowns are. However, yesterday she spoke to Nikolaj Damgaard and can inform them that at least one other person is interested in the case. If shown a screencap from the video she confirms the match with the holder of folder one. Damgaard introduced himself to her using his real name. He wanted to know if she could tell him anything about the activity of the mystery clowns. Damgaard hinted that he was working for a viral marketing firm, but would not say which one, or for which client. Julie asks the PCs if they believe that story or if it is a cover for something bigger. Depending on their interactions with her, she might become a minor impediment, or ally, during the Bayonne segment of the investigation.

PHIL GONZAGA

(core) Gruff Jersey guy Phil Gonzaga has worked in the liquor industry long enough to shy from attention from authority figures. That’s why he refused to identify Zach Moreno even though he knows full well that’s who he kicked out of his bar last year. **Cop Talk** allows a team member to flash official

credentials and make him more scared of not talking than attracting undue attention. He gives up Zach’s name, which combined with **Research** snags his home address.

MELISSA KENT

(core) Cute blonde hairdressing student Melissa Kent didn’t know who the clowns were when she was interviewed for the article last spring. But many months later, Zach tried to pick her up at the Mud Pit, confessing his role in the pranks in a bootless attempt to impress her. Although she feels no particular affection for him, she’s reluctant to talk, being a sensible minder of her own beeswax. **Flirting** changes her tune. She reveals that he told her the clown event was meant to promote a poetry slam night. It got out of hand and just turned into an exercise in scaring people for fun. He gave it up after Phil threatened to bar him from the Mud Pit for life. Since that’s the only interesting club in town, Zach chose to knock it off. If he’s started up again maybe he’s planning to move or something. Melissa still has Zach’s address and contact info in her phone — not that she’s even felt the urge to use it.

Asked if she’s seen anyone matching Damgaard’s description, Melissa blushes bright red and says no. The agent speaking to her doesn’t need Bullshit Detector to see that she’s not being truthful. Given **Reassurance** that no one cares about her personal life, she admits to hooking up with a man matching that description who found her on Tinder. Well actually come to think of it he said he found her on Tinder but, well she was a little wasted and can’t remember swiping his profile. She doesn’t remember telling him about Zach or clowns, but wait a minute. No, now she remembers. He did ask her about clowns, and she told him about Zach.

STEPHANIE BATES

Police spokesperson Stephanie Bates, a harried redhead in her mid-40s, can add nothing useful to the team’s notes. She and her superiors view the whole clown business as a ridiculous nuisance. If the team isn’t careful they might alert her to the fact that something important is going on. Should that happen, **Cop Talk** gets her to write off any concerns as being above her pay grade.

PURSUING DAMGAARD

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Clown Sightings, Zach Moreno, One-Car Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Zach Moreno, One-Car Murders, Leicester Outbreak

Once they know that the Esoterror op seems to be centered in Bayonne, the investigators may canvass hotels looking for him. As you would for any investigative dead end, describe this as taking a lot of time for the characters, while spending next to no session time on it.

SYMPs

We found Agent [[REDACTED]] in the men's room of a Shell station in Sylacauga, Alabama, propped up between two urinals. Her breathing was shallow, her pupils dilated. Despite the morning cold she perspired heavily. In her hand she still held the Glock, its chamber empty, she'd used to fire indiscriminately into the Walmart parking lot the night before. Though apparently conscious Agent [[REDACTED]] did not respond to queries — or to any other stimuli. She allowed herself to be led to the ambulance. It was not until Agent [[REDACTED]] performed a medical examination that we became aware of the organism — or rather, husk of a dead organism — attached by cartilaginous fibers to her ribcage.

— excerpt from Agent Loss Report 89W8,
OPERATION PERISH CARTON

Symps serve as couriers to more powerful Outer Dark Entities who take a direct interest in piercing the membrane and invading our world. These minor consciousnesses take perverse delight in servitude to mightier demons, and in literally manipulating humans. Summoned by mass murder rituals of shocking violence, they leak through pores in the membrane as fist-sized masses of slick tissue outwardly resembling oversized slugs. The victims chosen as hosts by the ritualists may not be willing participants. To thrive, symps must override and destroy the minds of horrified, resisting subjects. The symp crawls into its victim's mouth, slides down the esophagus, and starts to grow, becoming a mass one-and-a-half times the size of the host's heart. The symp sends out thick fibers to anchor itself to the subject's internal organs, and microscopic filaments to wire itself into the nervous system. It uses these to control the victim's actions. Taking command of speech and motor centers, it exercises a high degree of control over the host body. It can pull visual, verbal, and emotional memories from the victim's brain as needed, using them to successfully pose as the original person. Even a trained observer may spot no indications that the subject acts at the behest of an alien intelligence. The sole flaw in a symp's portrayal may be the inability to accurately mimic vulnerability. Symps regard human emotion with a mocking contempt that makes them poor actors when called upon to exhibit weakness.

A symp carries out a complex mission on Earth, the details of which are provided to it by either its ODE superiors or the human Esoterrorists responsible for summoning it. Once its initial goals are accomplished, it releases itself back to the Outer Dark. The tissue mass regresses into a benign tumor, which is over a period of months reabsorbed into the host's body. Hosts retain no recollection of their time spent under the symp's domination. Hypnotic regression can retrieve these latent memories but at the risk of grave psychological damage.

Ordo Veritatis researchers think they might be able to communicate with a live symp held within a captive and sedated host. The invasive experimental apparatus they have devised to attempt this remains in the prototype stage and yet to be tested. Symps abandon their host bodies when it seems that they are likely to be killed or rendered unconscious, rendering live capture a challenge. They may stand their ground and fight, risking fatal self-sacrifice, if they determine that they have a solid chance of achieving their mission objectives. They can boost their hosts' gross motor skills and hand-eye coordination, but can't make them stronger or more resistant to harm. Symp infestation reduces the victim's overall physical well-being.

If a host dies with the symp still active in its body, the symp consciousness dies as well.

GAME STATISTICS

Are those of the host, with +2 to Athletics, +4 Driving, -4 Health, +4 Scuffling, +4 Shooting.



Once they have Damgaard's name (from the previous or next scenes), they may use this to try to hunt him down. The conspiracy wanted Damgaard and the others for their passports and valid identities. Even so, the symps take measures to minimize their brushes with the grid. Damgaard travels under his own name, but avoids using credit cards. Instead he uses cash withdrawn at intervals from ATMs, accessing multiple dummy accounts set up by Robert Powell. He and the others have ditched their mobile phones in favor of untraceable prepaids. Rather than register at chain hotels, which would get credit card approval numbers and thus reveal his location, he stays at no-tell motels happy to take cash deposits from potentially skeezy customers.

Depending on how they time their legwork and the parallel hunt for Zach Moreno, their attempts to find Damgaard may be interrupted by the events of "One-Car Murders."

Players might come up with a brilliant way of learning where he's staying that we haven't anticipated, and you can't see a way of averting. However, by that time he's already gone.

Electronic Surveillance or Law: Once they learn his name, they can send a request to Ordo headquarters to have it tracked. To protect the deep secret of the organization's existence, requests to the global security network must be made in a circuitous manner and therefore take a while to process.

Twenty-four hours after their arrival in Bayonne, Damgaard's passport shows up in the system, when he goes through passport control at Heathrow. The Ordo can't intervene on the spot without exposing itself, but at least knows that Damgaard has moved on to the UK.

(core) Another day later, **Research** alerts the group to a similar clown mob story from Leicester. See "Leicester Outbreak," p. 23.

Research into Nikolaj Damgaard reveals that he is a lobbyist with ties as a fundraiser to the current Danish governing party. His specialties include energy and housing policy. His firm works for a committee putting together a bid for an upcoming Winter Olympics. A divorced father of two, Damgaard has succeeded in keeping his swinger activities quiet. (Not that they'd cause much of a scandal in relatively liberal Denmark, where he is not a public official but a behind-the-scenes type.)

Spin out more of this irrelevant detail as needed. Except for their ability to move discreetly around the world, the résumés of the hosts don't have much of a bearing on the conspiracy.

ZACH MORENO

SCENE TYPE: Alternate/Pipe

LEAD-INS: Clown Sightings, Pursuing Damgaard, One-Car Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Pursuing Damgaard, One-Car Murders, Leicester Outbreak

No matter what time of day it is when the team meets up with him, Zach Moreno answers the door of his basement apartment in pajama bottoms and a threadbare T-shirt. In his late twenties

yet still baby-faced, Zach plans to be famous but hasn't quite figured out what art form he's good at. He organizes poetry events and creativity workshops, works as assistant manager at a Starbucks, and takes care of his ailing mother, who lives upstairs. She owns the house.

At first Zach denies any knowledge of the clown situation. He persists in his denials when told that Phil or Melissa led the group here.

Bullshit Detector: He's lying through his teeth.

Zach is no match for a fit and trained Ordo agent; by spending 2 **Athletics** any character can restrain him long enough for the others to toss his apartment. There they find the telltale clown costumes and makeup. They also locate a leather document holder, contents described below.

Yesterday morning SympOne came to him, wearing Nikolaj Damgaard's body. Rapidly noting his loser existence and suppressed ambitions, it subjected him to a rapid conversion experience. It convinced Zach that Nikolaj and his international group of multimedia artists represented his ticket out of aimless obscurity. Zach agreed to resume his clown activities, recruiting a friend and fellow wannabe poet, Reggie Folsom, to also don the makeup. After token objections, Zach agreed to make the clowns more overtly sinister than before — hence the knife-waving.

Intimidation gets him to give up the story, though only the bits of it the team specifically asks about. From his point of view, it sounds like this:

- ▶ This rich German dude, Nikolaj Damgaard, heard of his clown project and it inspired this cool international viral marketing campaign. [Damgaard is actually Danish.]
- ▶ The campaign is for an awesome new kind of vodka that through a new chemical process looks as black as ink.
- ▶ The vodka's brand name is Outbreak. Don't spread that around, or Zach will get in trouble with his new boss.
- ▶ Evil clowns will feature prominently in the commercials for Outbreak.
- ▶ It might include "found footage" of his own sinister clown stunts.

The document holder contains several unmarked plastic vials containing a black liquid.

Chemistry: It's tattoo ink, imprinted with chemicals that will glow under UV light. The effect will probably fade after the tattoo undergoes a few years of wear.

A sheet of paper depicting a complex sigil of intertwining teeth and thorns accompanies the ink.

(pipe clue for "Swallowed") Zach really doesn't want to talk about these items. On a 2-point **Intimidation** spend he says Nikolaj gave them to him to get himself and any of his clown accomplices tattooed. Only people bearing this tattoo, with this particular ink, will score VIP invites to a super-exclusive EDM event celebrating the launch of Outbreak — date and location to be announced. If the team looks like it's going to confiscate it, he begs and wheedles to be allowed to keep it. What's so

wrong about wanting to go to the best party in the history of civilization? Anyway, this seemed to be a whole different business than the clown thing, something he would get to do later.

He's not admitting it to himself, but, on an instinctive level, Zach understands that there's something really evil and transformative about that tattoo and the party, more than just a marketing bash. Whatever it is, whatever it turns him into, he's on board for that, one hundred percent. Play Zach's responses to questions about the ink and design with this subtext in mind.

Forensic Psychology hints at some of this — he associates these items with the power and assurance he has always strived for, but never achieved.

Zach has every intention of continuing his clown antics. Expect the players to debate several options in deciding what to do about this. They might:

- ▶ turn him over to the Ordo, which sweeps him off to a black site for debriefing and deprogramming.
- ▶ let him continue, hoping to smoke out Damgaard.
- ▶ **Intimidate** him into stopping. (Requires another 2-point spend.)

Zach asks them not to cause trouble for his pal Reggie Folsom. If they find him at his crummy apartment or while working his job as a cable installer, they encounter an affable party hound without a moral compass. He finds it hilarious to scare people as a knife-wielding clown, and can't wait to go to that Outbreak bash. Reggie never met Damgaard and has zero clue about the scheme's wider significance.

Forensic Psychology: Pliable, none too bright, and up for whatever, Reggie fits the profile of Esoterror dupe to a T.

ONE-CAR MURDERS

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Clown Sightings, Pursuing Damgaard, Zach Moreno

LEAD-OUTS: Clown Sightings, Pursuing Damgaard, Zach Moreno, Leicester Outbreak

Late on their second night in Bayonne, after their first full day of legwork, the team learns of a horrific murder tied to the case. To the local police it merely looks like an awful traffic accident, but they know better.

The victim is someone they spoke to earlier in the day about the case. This might be Julie Chin, Phil Gonzaga, Melissa Kent, Stephanie Bates, or another minor witness you created while improvising responses to investigator actions. As their summoners and useful future Esoterror lackeys, Zach Moreno and Reggie Folsom enjoy immunity from clown attacks.

Given a choice of potential victims, pick the one the players seemed to like the best, or whose gruesome death will otherwise play as maximally distressing.

If the team liaised with local police using phony official credentials, they get a call from Stephanie Bates letting them



know that someone associated with the case has been accidentally killed. Unless it's Stephanie Bates who was killed, in which case her audibly shaken superior, Lieutenant Lester Pittman, makes the courtesy call.

Otherwise a character with **Cop Talk** hears the report on police scanners.

Arriving at the scene, they see and discover the following.

The accident scene matches one of the earlier clown sightings, on a grassy area next to a highway off-ramp into the city. Though desolate, and ill lit at night, it is surprisingly close to downtown.

(Adjust this scene accordingly if the team declines for some reason to visit the scene and instead relies on after-the-fact information gathered by police and the local medical examiner.)

The victim's vehicle hit a traffic sign head on. No other vehicle seems to be involved with the crash.

Evidence Collection: Tire marks confirm this as a single vehicle accident. Further, they show that the car sped up toward the traffic sign, as if the driver panicked, tried to hit the brakes, but instead hit the accelerator. It crushed the sign and smashed into a barrier behind it.

Mechanics: (as Investigative ability) The car is totaled; the impact cut the engine in two.

The victim is still in the vehicle when the team arrives. Though the condition of the body does not seem to match a collision, local officials are attributing it to a freakish accident. "When a body bounces around in a car after a hard impact, all kinds of crazy stuff can happen," one of them says, shrugging.

The victim lies back in the driver's seat, head lolling back, neck broken. The skin covering the mouth and lower jaw has been pulled away. The jaws and teeth lie stripped to the bone, exposing the grinning position of a skeletal mouth. As you'd expect, the torn flesh around the wound is red with gore. The combined effect, then, is of a victim frozen in a hideous laughing rictus. Blood has drained out of the face, leaving it unusually pale. Should one already be thinking about evil clowns, it calls to mind the whitened features created by pancake makeup.

The car's air bag did not deploy. **Mechanics:** (Investigative) It is in proper working condition and should absolutely have done so.

Forensic Anthropology: The broken neck was the result of the crash, which did kill the victim. But the smile wound was inflicted post-mortem, probably immediately so. (1-point spend) The flesh appears to have been torn off with two sets of fingers — which would require an inhuman strength no human hands can muster.

Fingerprinting: A partial print can be lifted from the shattered windshield. Checked later, it is human. Almost.

Evidence Collection: A patch of mud on the crumpled hood, which the locals also ignore, can be reconstructed as a foot, boot, or shoe print — about sixteen inches long.

A drive around that night turns up no killer clown encounters. If the team already knows that Zach and Reggie are behind the recent sightings, they might find them on the other side of town in clown regalia.

A similar accident, involving another GMC peripherally connected to the investigation, occurs the next night, in a like location. A pattern emerges:

- 1 the victim suddenly accelerated toward a barrier
- 2 the air bag didn't work
- 3 the corpse bears the same post-mortem mutilation, grinning and pale-faced

Although they can now point to something definitely eerie, the team of course won't want to deprive local cops of their comfortable, if absurd, belief that nothing weird is happening. No point making the Veil-Out harder than it has to be!

Approached about this, Zach and Reggie deny any involvement with these incidents. Zach tries to argue that they have nothing whatsoever to do with clowns. **Bullshit Detector** indicates that his denials of involvement in the deaths are honest, even if he knows he's on shaky grounds when he dismisses any connection to clowns. He refuses at first to desist from his viral marketing, but a point of **Intimidation** or **Interrogation** gets him to stop.

If the team remains in town the third night (as it likely will, given that clown murders are in progress), they can either wait for something to happen or go out on a hunt themselves.

REACTIVE MODE

Another GMC connected to the case (which by now might include an investigating officer from the previous incidents) comes to them reporting a terrifying near miss.

They report driving around Bayonne's periphery, then seeing a clown standing by an obstacle or barrier at the side of the road. At first they assumed it was a person in a costume. Then the figure's eyes glowed. The clown-like being leapt onto the road and charged right at the car. The driver tried to hit the brakes but instead felt his or her foot hitting the accelerator, as if grabbed by an unseen hand. The figure jumped up onto the hood of the car, crouching and drooling, with clawlike hands. The car beelined for the obstacle when a miracle happened — the car suddenly spun out, knocking the creature from the hood into the grassy area beside the highway. Instead of hitting the obstacle headlong, the car fishtailed, with the trunk or back hatch clipping it sideways. The clown figure hunched in the grass for a moment, as if deciding what to do, then loped off, disappearing into the gloom.

HUNT MODE

If the team drives around the sorts of spots where Zach was staging clown sightings, they eventually confront the giggler themselves.

They see a white-faced lurking figure by the side of the road. Its eyes flash inhumanly, as described above. Then the driver feels his or her foot smashing down on the accelerator, sending the car zooming toward the obstacle or barrier the clown capers in front of.

GIGGLER

I always loved clowns when I was a kid. So when I took Jennifer to the fair and she freaked completely out at the sight of one, I admit I didn't react good. I told her she had to get over it, and be a tough little girl, because the world sure as hell has worse waiting for her than someone trying to make her laugh with a dachshund balloon. She cried and cried and cried that night and like a fool I told her we were going back the next day, to see there was nothing scary about clowns. It was just a man in makeup with a foam rubber nose, trying to amuse her.

Jennifer's room is right above the living room. When that night I heard her window opening, I rushed right up the stairs. But I got to her just in time to see the clown taking her away, grinning at me, its eyes glowing. It leapt out the window, laughing. Jennifer screamed. She lay dead in the grass by the swing set. The clown thing was already gone. The next night, another child in the next town was thrown from her second-story window too.

How will I ever forgive myself?

— testimony of witness Tracy Sutton, Gregwood Springs, CO, case file 32D098, OPERATION HAZY CHAIN

Gigglers slip through the membrane wherever the disjunction between the supposed jollity of clowns and their primal creepiness reaches a fever pitch. From the beginnings of culture tricksters have always played a contradictory role, at the same time joyful and sinister. The modern blindness to their dark side creates the cognitive dissonance Outer Dark Entities thrive on. They rely on, provoke, and feed upon coulrophobia, the fear of clowns, which strikes children and adults alike.

A giggler appears as a monstrous clown, with glowing headlight-like eyes, a loping gait, elongated feet, ash-white faces, and hungry smiles. They may wear traditional colorful clown costumes or merely a collection of hobo-style rags. Gigglers always emit a high-pitched, grating laugh when carrying out their acts of carnage.

The details of a giggler killing differ from case to case. Once established, though, the giggler must repeat them, with minimal variation. The giggler of the Gregwood Springs event could only crawl through second-story windows, snatch children, and jump with them onto the lawn below. The specimens in this case can only charge at drivers. Gigglers can suppress human reflexes, preventing witnesses or victims from reacting properly to their presence. Having established its MO during a first encounter, however, it cannot later suppress reflexes in other ways.

Gigglers kill through stealth and surprise. If physically confronted outside of their routine, they rank on the lower end of the ODE formidability scale. Once under attack they can defend themselves, however far this takes them from their usual pattern. Wherever possible they strike living opponents in the face with their clawlike hands and try to rip the lower parts of their faces off.

A single inciting coulrophobic event brings a solitary giggler across the membrane. It then tries to terrify and kill as many people as it can before it is itself caught and destroyed. A day or so after each event, it collects a trophy connected with each slaying. Evidence removed to another location can be stolen from there, saving the giggler from returning to the scene of the crime. Once it has assembled items from at least five killings, it can then create a crib or crucible containing these items, and perform a ritual bringing more gigglers across. An uninterrupted ritual summons a number of gigglers equal to the number of killings connected to the crucible.

If the ritual is stopped midway through, and any of the gigglers slain, all of the gigglers are destroyed. A giggler brought into the world by an Esoterror operation is connected in this way to all others summoned by the same human accomplice. Stopping one ritual kills all the gigglers associated with that accomplice, no matter how far apart they might be.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 12, Scuffling 12

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: +1 (rending fingers)

ARMOR: None



ANTAGONIST TIMELINE

This scenario triggers some events from player actions, even without a direct cause and effect. It also has a ticking clock element; the faster the team wraps up in Bayonne, the fewer people die in Leicester.

Keep track of how many days the group spends on each phase of the investigation. Adjust the timing as desired. You may choose to ease up on a floundering group, or to maintain a modicum of challenge for surprisingly efficient ones.

Even if the group decides to go directly from the sex club to Newark airport without tackling the key clues found in "Perfect Family," Damgaard has more than a day's head start on them.

- ▶ **X Days:** An indeterminate period depending on the order the team chooses to tackle the folders in. Can be as little as 1 day, or considerably longer.
- ▶ **Day 1:** Damgaard arrives in Bayonne and contacts Zach Moreno. That night Zach resumes clown activities. The team is assembled and arrives in San Francisco.
- ▶ **Day 2:** Team travels to Bayonne. Article from Coulrophobia Handout #3 released. Damgaard departs for UK.
- ▶ **Day 3:** Damgaard arrives at Heathrow, travels to Leicester. Meets Des Watson. Watson starts up clown activities.
 - First Bayonne clown murder.
- ▶ **Day 4:** Damgaard travels from Leicester to the channel tunnel and across to France, where he purchases a used car. He drives to a small privately owned hotel near Lyon where he pays in advance in cash and stays the night.
 - Second Bayonne clown murder.
 - Watson and accomplices fan clown panic in Leicester with #LeicesterClowns hashtag. Article from Coulrophobia Handout #4 appears.

- ▶ **Day 5:** Skirting Switzerland to avoid passport control, Damgaard continues on from Lyon to Pordenone.
 - Another Bayonne clown murder or investigators instigate giggler encounter.
 - Morning:* Anti-clown meetup announced on Twitter.
 - Evening:* Meetup occurs at the Red Pony Pub.
- ▶ **Day 6:** Damgaard meets Enrico Falomi.
 - Earliest date of first Leicester clown murder.
- ▶ **Day 7:** Another Leicester clown murder?
 - First clown sighting in Pordenone.
- ▶ **Day 8:** Another Leicester clown murder, if giggler is still active.
 - Second Pordenone clown sighting.
- ▶ **Day 9:** One clown murder apiece in Leicester and Pordenone, if their respective giggers remain at large. Copycat clown sightings begin in another city.
- ▶ **Day 10:** One clown murder apiece in any city with previous clown sightings, if their respective giggers remain at large. Copycat clown sightings begin in two other cities.

New cities for copycat incidents, in order of appearance: Johannesburg; Panama City; Haparanda (Sweden); Rochester, NY; Kraków. After Pordenone, they generate spontaneously based on news reports, and no longer need Damgaard to instigate them.

The scenario concludes when the team destroys giggers as they are summoned in a crucible.

In the event of a long initial period before Day 1, players may wonder what Damgaard was up to before his arrival in Bayonne. Establish that he was elsewhere trying to get clown panics started, but without much impact. Bring this in only if players ask.

When the driver loses control of the car, the clown runs toward it.

Two successful tests allow the driver to regain control:

- ▶ **Athletics** (Difficulty 4) to free the foot from the accelerator and hit the brakes. This also dislodges the giggler from the hood.
- ▶ **Driving** (Difficulty 7) to regain control of the speeding vehicle and avert a crash. *Tell the player that this is a high Difficulty, and an extra bonus is granted for an especially high result.* On a result of 9 or more, the driver is even able to hit the clown while regaining control, costing it 6 Health.

If the car crashes, all PCs inside take + x damage; x is 7 minus the result of the **Driving** test. After a crash investigators must

make Difficulty 4 **Athletics** tests or spend their first round of combat dazed and in shock.

Some groups might strong-arm Zach into coming along for the ride. If so, you might contrive a way for him to meet a bone-shattering end here. Give the players a chance, if not a great one, to save him, should they be so motivated.

Killing this giggler ends the danger in Bayonne, allowing the team to move on to Leicester knowing that their work here is done.

Does the giggler survive their first encounter with it? Expect the group to plan a new way of finding and killing it. Throw in obstacles to keep this suspenseful but not prohibitively tough. If they waste what feels like undue time hunting this giggler, advance the English and Italian giggler infestations accordingly. This shows that the cost of concentrating on this phase is to worsen the later ones.

LEICESTER OUTBREAK

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Pursuing Damgaard, Zach Moreno, One-Car Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Des Watson, Leicester Murders

Shortly after they learn that Nikolaj Damgaard is in England, **Research** turns up a fresh news story, dated yesterday: see Coulrophobia Handout #4.

By this point the team may realize that speaking to people about the case puts them in danger of being killed, as per the incidents of “One-Car Murders.” Still, even if they minimize contacts with locals, they’ll probably have to talk to someone to find the Leicester equivalent of Zach Moreno.

Leicester, in central England, is best known for an eponymous university and the car park where Richard III was recently dug up. Aside from its ODE epidemic, the team may find it a pleasant enough place. Its sole good restaurant is a mid-range Indian place.

The team may start with the Twitter hashtag mentioned in the article, #LeicesterClowns. Reversing the order of its associated search result to make it chronological, they see a few key posters talking about the sightings a lot, with more local residents joining in over the first day or so. One particularly angry Twitterer, @foyobs, calls for a community meeting. Others set a time and place for it in a pub called the Red Pony. Use the timeline in the sidebar to determine how long ago the meeting took place relative to the team’s activities.

If the players barreled through or dropped the Bayonne investigation to pursue Damgaard, you may need to adjust events described here or collapse the timeline. Ideally the meetup has already occurred when they arrive in Leicester, but you could reconfigure things so that they’re present for it, improvising adjustments as you go.

Anthropology: If you want to ask questions at a pub, the best time for it is late afternoon, when a few regulars have drifted in, but it’s not so busy yet that you won’t be able to strike up a collective conversation.

Regulars they might find at this time include:

- ▶ Harley Robinson, a lanky, prematurely balding lorry driver in his late twenties.
- ▶ Mason Lord, a weatherbeaten former industrial engineer in his mid-sixties.
- ▶ Lola Simmons, a stout, pugnacious cafeteria worker in her early fifties.
- ▶ Matthew Collins, a University of Leicester management student taking a semester off to intensify his drinking problem. He dresses like Dr. Who — not a specific Dr. Who, but like a Dr. Who in general.

Anthropology: British people aren’t as gregarious as their American counterparts. Strangers will want to put them at their ease before launching into questions about their neighbors —

even the ones they don’t much like. *Skip this, of course, if your players and their characters are British.*

Reassurance gets some or all of the above to say the following:

- ▶ About a dozen people showed up the other night to worry about the jobs in the clown outfits.
- ▶ (core) The ringleader was Des Watson, who has some kind of computer job with the Royal Mail and is always in a lather about something.
- ▶ His father, Oliver, was there too, saying that the clowns were a distraction from the real problem. Des shouted him down before he said what that was, but it was probably foreigners.
- ▶ Des’ friend Julian Barber was egging him on. He got quite drunk, as usual, and had to be carried home by his mates.
- ▶ The clowns are most likely just youngsters with nothing better to do.
- ▶ Youngsters with nothing better to do are dangerous! The police should round them up and put them away as a precautionary measure.

Use the above as a template, adjusting as necessary, if the group seeks information about the meeting or attitudes toward the clown incidents in some other way.

If the group goes to the Leicestershire police, they speak to Officer Harriet Campbell, a white-haired woman who looks rather frail for her line of work and must be nearing retirement age. (**Cop Talk:** If she’s this old and still an officer, she isn’t very good, or completely unambitious. Obviously she’s the officer who gets the nonsense cases dumped on her.)

- ▶ The superintendent isn’t happy to see a story like this making Leicester look foolish.
- ▶ He sent around patrols, but, naturally, pranksters would duck out of the way if they saw officers coming.
- ▶ She spoke to concerned citizens after their meeting and explained that getting all flustered about it was exactly what they should do if they want the pranks to continue.
- ▶ A few years ago the force investigated a similar incident, in which an unidentified man dressed up in a bat-like creature costume on stilts and drifted past CCTV cameras late at night. At the time they assumed someone at the uni was making an anti-surveillance protest. It could be the same person behind the clown nonsense. No laws were broken, so they had no cause to launch an investigation.
- ▶ Complaints to police are confidential, so naturally she can’t reveal the identities of the people who reported being menaced. (2-point **Cop Talk** spend) “Now that you’ve promised absolute discretion...” They were Alisha Bolton, Ruby Connolly, and Naoimh Owen.

THE WITNESSES

The witnesses all reiterate the basic story from the news article. In each case a couple of people dressed as clowns leapt out at them from behind a hedge or other barrier. They growled, hissed or stamped their feet, chasing the victims a short distance when they started to run.

Teenaged Alisha Bolton was returning from babysitting when she encountered the clowns.

Pensioner Ruby Connolly had just purchased groceries and had to take extra heart medication afterward.

Naomh Owen, a retired electrical engineer, regrets that he wasn't ten years younger, in which case he would have given them a thorough thrashing.

None of them attended the pub meet. They just want to forget the whole thing. Niamh in particular has been ribbed mercilessly by his friends ever since he mentioned it. He reckons there are others who saw the clowns and have not come forward for fear of ridicule.

DES WATSON

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Leicester Outbreak, Leicester Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Declan's Metal Shop, Leicester Murders, Pordenone Incidents

Heavy-set, in his late thirties and sporting an auburn neck-beard, Des Watson works an IT job he hates and dreams of something more. Three years and two and a half stones ago, he dressed up as a bat creature and paraded past CCTV cameras on the high street as a sort of situationist prank. Though police never bothered to find out who he was, Esoterror sympathizers in the UK reached out to him and began to groom him for possible use. The group trying to recruit him got rolled up in an Ordo operation last year, but not before the ODEs they were in league with made note of his location. When Damgaard came to him, he barked out an enthusiastic "yeah, mate." Unlike Zach Moreno he knows perfectly well who he's aiding and looks forward to receiving his reward for services rendered during the big Pacific Island event. He uses the vodka viral marketing story, knowing it to be a cover for something else. What else, he looks forward to learning, when his superiors deem it fit. He has no idea that when speaking to Damgaard he was dealing directly with an extra-dimensional entity.

When not working four days a week at the Royal Mail Delivery Office on Campbell Street, Des can be found drinking on the backyard patio of the small home he shares with his racist dad. His buddies, all in on the clown prank, imbibe alongside him. These loutish, underemployed malcontents are:

- ▶ Mike Shepherd, a janitor who hates it that he can't get into bar fights anymore after he damaged his left retina.

- ▶ Muhammad Fuller, a roofer who un-converted to Islam a couple of years back but is too skint to change his legal name back to Reg. Goes by "Mad" for short.
- ▶ Kieran Taylor, Des' young assistant, who looks up to the older man because he encourages his misogyny.
- ▶ Self-employed welder and former drug dealer Declan Reed, the only one of the group Des trusts with the truth about Esoterror and Outer Dark Entities.

Cranky pensioner Oliver Watson drinks with them, trying to cadge as many of their beers as possible. He tries to steer any conversation he is present for into a condemnation of the fucking Romanians who are coming to take good British jobs and why shouldn't an old man have the right to be with his own kind?

Des hotly denies responsibility for the clown incidents, with an offended vehemence that pings even the most ill-tuned **Bullshit Detector**. The rest, except for Oliver, seem similarly shifty when the topic comes up. **Bullshit Detector** also paints Des as a liar when he denies being the bat-suit man from years ago.

After a suitable period of chatting-slash-observation, **Forensic Psychology** identifies Declan and Des as the group ringleaders, both displaying pronounced antisocial tendencies. It marks Kieran as being especially malleable and in search of an authority figure. And Mad is obviously the dumbest of the lot.

If a player asks, Des and Declan both have recent, identical tattoos. These match the design they may have found on Zach Moreno, and grant admission to the big future event.

Forensic Anthropology: There's something wrong with Mike's right eye.

If a team member braces Kieran elsewhere, acts in a paternal fashion, and gives him the **Flattery** of basic respect, he admits that Des is behind the clown incidents. He's been hired by a Danish advert fellow to be in a teaser campaign for a vodka brand. It involves Declan building something in his metal shop, but the two of them are keeping that secret.

The same information can be gotten from Mad with **Reassurance** and a cock-and-bull story explaining how the team is working with Des on the clown project, and so it's okay to tell them what they already know.

Or from Mike, with **Intimidation** and a threat to hit him in the eye and blind him.

If players make it apparent that they're going to talk to more than one of the cronies, split up the two bits of information between two of them.

If they talk to all three, the last one says that Des was the bat-suit man, and that a bunch of muppets with daft occult ideas contacted him to get them to join their club. Of course he didn't because what a lot of rot, yes?

Oliver's house isn't exactly well secured. **Infiltration** (as an Investigative ability) grants them access if they wait until everyone is away. This happens when Des goes to work and Oliver trots down to the Red Pony.

For that matter, **Negotiation** and a hundred quid persuades Oliver to let them search his son's room. Drink doesn't grow on trees, does it?

The search turns up:

- ▶ clown costumes, makeup, and Twitter accounts tied to the telltale hashtag on his current computer
- ▶ **Data Retrieval:** The smashed hard drive from an old computer. Bits of scrambled files from several years indicate that a local Esoterror cell tried to contact him.
 - ▶ **Textual Analysis:** Recovered snippets match emails written by members of a defunct cell the Ordo swept up last year.

Des is always fiddling with his smartphone. **Filch** (as Investigative) gets it off him long enough to dump its contents (via **Electronic Surveillance**) onto a drive. 1 point of **Filch** allows the return of the phone unsuspected. Otherwise Des catches them at it and realizes that they might be the enemy agents Damgaard warned him against.

(core) Contrary to instructions, the phone number corresponding to Damgaard's new European SIM card appears in the contacts, under the not-so-concealing name Vodka Man. **Electronic Surveillance** locates the phone in Pordenone, Italy.

DES

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 6, Scuffling 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -1

WEAPON: -2 (fists)

DECLAN

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 10, Scuffling 6

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -1

WEAPON: +1 (spanner)

DECLAN'S METAL SHOP

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Des Watson, Leicester Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Leicester Murders, Pordenone Incidents

Declan has basic security measures in place in his metal shop, a garage beside his ill-kept home. Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** gets the group through them.

Document Analysis: Of the stacks of plans and schematics lying around his shop, the best way to narrow the search is to identify those on relatively fresh paper. One of these stands out from the innocuous others. A title slug identifies it as a crucible. It appears to be a gigantic cradle made out of car parts. A scrawled note on the bottom reads "Concept design — will

WRAPPING UP LEICESTER

The team may consider it safe to move on to Pordenone if they have killed the giggler. They may decide to leave Des and Declan in place, or to apprehend them and turn them over to the Ordo for interrogation and likely incarceration.

Alternately, if they have the pipe clue from the Prologue scene "Perfect Family" (p. 10), they may realize that they can kill whatever gigglers currently prowl Italy or elsewhere by allowing Des and Declan to perform the crucible ritual here, then busting in and slaying the creatures as they begin to coalesce. This wraps up the scenario, leaving only Damgaard as a loose end. They can then travel to Pordenone and find his body, which dies when the symp abandons it.

A third possibility has the team moving on to Pordenone without killing the giggler, figuring they can destroy it by interrupting a crucible ceremony there.

depend on makes, salvageable parts." Another penciled question reads: "Ask what % can be from unrelated vehicles."

(These plans, made from Damgaard's verbal description, show him how to make a crucible, the device in which more than one giggler can be summoned during a single ritual.)

The team finds the crucible already in progress if they enter the shop after the evidence lot robbery described below.

LEICESTER MURDERS

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Pursuing Damgaard, Zach Moreno, One-Car Murders, Leicester Outbreak, Des Watson, Declan's Metal Shop

LEAD-OUTS: Des Watson, Declan's Metal Shop, Pordenone Incidents

If the team arrives after Day Six (see "Timeline," p. 22), the giggler summoned by Des' activities may have committed one or more murders. These exactly follow the MO of the Bayonne incidents and target people peripherally touched by the case. For murders prior to the team's arrival, choose people who attended the Red Pony meeting but are not otherwise referred to here, or witnesses to the sightings themselves (see "The Witnesses," opposite). Quick profiles for other meeting attendees:

- ▶ Middle-aged pipe-fitter William Saunders, who hates troublemakers of all stripes
- ▶ Philosophy student Ethan Dobson, who attended the clown meeting as a laugh
- ▶ Aspiring politician Mia Fowler, who attended the meetup to network with future constituents
- ▶ Pensioner Leo Begum, always ready to be frightened by something

Murders occurring after the team has begun to investigate victimize characters who have made an impression on the group. Even a member of Des' group, other than Declan, might be targeted. The giggler doesn't care about its human enablers.

The team can't find the giggler until they establish a psychic connection to it by interacting with others in Leicester whose lives it has affected. Before that, a new victim dies each night, somewhere they're not, no matter how much they drive around looking for evil clowns.

Once they've established the connection, roll a die at the start of each nightly hunt. On an odd result, the giggler strikes someone else. On an even result, it comes after them, exposing itself to their gunfire. The encounter reprises their confrontation in Bayonne — except now the Athletics and Driving test Difficulties are reduced by 1.

After three or more murders have been committed, if the giggler remains at large, a curious nighttime incident occurs at the police evidence lot where the cars have been taken. A skulking clownish figure with glowing eyes leaps over the fence, rips sections off of various vehicles, then leaps back over the fence. Security camera footage records the event from a single angle.

If the team has already spoken with Harriet Campbell, she disobeys her superintendent's orders to share it with them. Clearly the recording shows something beyond the reach of ordinary policing. Less of a dim bulb than she may have at first appeared, she suspects that the truth lies more within the team's jurisdiction. Like any British authority figure, she believes the public should be protected from unpleasant information, and proves a reliable accomplice to any Veil-Out.

Otherwise the group gets a secure transmission from the Ordo's signals intelligence unit, which has grabbed the footage from the infosphere.

If the giggler has already been killed but Des and Declan remain at large, figures matching their respective silhouettes are seen to break into the evidence lot and steal the car parts.

After this happens, the team can find the beginnings of a crucible by entering Declan's metal shop.

PORDENONE INCIDENTS

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Des Watson, Declan's Metal Shop, Leicester Murders

LEAD-OUTS: Running Into Damgaard, Giggler Crucible

Pordenone is a small city of around fifty thousand people in northern Italy, to the east of the "boot." It holds an annual silent film festival and boasts a requisite assortment of Gothic and Renaissance churches and palazzos, along with the ruins of a Roman villa.

If none of the PCs speak Italian, pick the option you think your players will most enjoy:

- ▶ Ask them to justify which one might speak it and award 1 point in Languages (Italian) to the player with the most fun or plausible explanation. That character is then assumed to be translating for the others when speaking to locals. You probably want to avoid acting this out, unless you do happen to know Italian.
- ▶ The PCs meet an Italian Ordo operative, Raffaella Baroni, upon arrival in town. She dresses like a chic university professor. White streaks run through her raven hair. As soon as she can, Raffaella mentions that she hasn't taken a field assignment in nearly a decade. (*What's that you say? You might try to arrange for her to meet a terrible end at a pivotal moment? Wow, that simply never occurred to us.*)

Check how many days have elapsed on the timeline (p. 22). This tells you how far Damgaard's Pordenone recruit, Enrico Falomi, has gotten into his phase of the operation. He may be yet to start, have initiated sightings, or have summoned a giggler that is now killing people, as per Bayonne and Leicester.

Enrico Falomi is a teenage Communist turned twenty-something supporter of the far right Fiamma Tricolore party, turned thirty-something nihilist and would-be occultist. Unemployed for most of his life, he earns an occasional buck as a street performer. During the film festival, he dresses up as Charlie Chaplin. He attracted the attention of ODEs when he stabbed a tourist while in full Chaplin garb. They found rich potential in the discordant irony of this juxtaposition. The victim recovered, and Enrico's case remains before the notoriously glacial Italian court system. Demonic presences have been whispering to him ever since, priming him for the arrival of a master ritualist.

In person, Enrico comes across as sullen and reluctant to speak. While playing him, avoid making eye contact. He denies involvement in any clown hoaxing, but **Bullshit Detector** isn't buying that.

Anyone bothering Enrico soon has to deal with his protective older brother Giustino. Burly and blustering, he warns Enrico against talking to anyone, for fear of jeopardizing his court case. Giustino works as a civilian employee of the Carabinieri, maintaining their vehicle fleet. He also manages their vehicle impound lot. The agents learn this if they ask around about Enrico, or shadow Giustino. Clever players will see how easy this will make it for Enrico to get access to cars smashed during giggler murders. Asking around about him, they learn that he does help his brother fix cars — indicating that he has the know-how to make a crucible from them.

Friendless except for his brother, Enrico performed the roadside clown interventions by himself. Witnesses, who might have already gone on to become giggler victims, include:

- ▶ Gianni de Paulis, a gruff senior known for blowing his top and threatening to beat people who annoy him. Considered a lovable crank who wouldn't really hurt a fly.

- ▶ Luca Marchesi, thin-faced crooked antique dealer and drunk. Considered a lovable scoundrel.
- ▶ Sonia Reggiani, still glamorous retired *scuola superiore* (high school) teacher. Half the men in town nurse an enormous crush on her.
- ▶ Primo Peracino, ruddy-faced journalist who sidelines as a projectionist. Disliked for stirring up controversy, he argues to anyone who will listen that Enrico should be awaiting trial in custody.

RUNNING INTO DAMGAARD

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Pordenone Incidents

LEAD-OUT: Giggler Crucible

When, as per the timeline, copycat clown events start sprouting up in other cities without his intervention, Damgaard realizes he can stay in Pordenone to supervise the next stage of summoning. Bringing multiple giggers into the world in one go will ratchet up the terror, and thus the damage to the membrane.

Prompt the team with the following info when the multiple incidents occur.

Research: New first-stage clown sightings, with pranksters posing as clowns by roadways and triggering social media flaps, have occurred in both Johannesburg and Panama City at the same time.

Occult Studies: Esoterror ops often work like this — at some point, the original instigator is no longer required to spark them. Damgaard probably isn't in either Johannesburg or Panama City.

If he's not there, he may well still be in Pordenone.

Anthropology: Although the locals will be protective of their own, foreign tourists won't enjoy that level of protection.

Forensic Accounting: Damgaard has clearly been staying in places that will take cash deposits in lieu of a credit card. In a city this small, there can't be that many small, privately owned hotels that fit that criteria.

If the team canvasses small hotels, they find the place where he is staying, the Gorizia B&B, in a period that varies according to **Architecture** spend. (**Architecture** stands in for urban geography here.)

- ▶ 3 points: 2 hours
- ▶ 2 points: 6 hours
- ▶ 1 point: 10 hours

This not unreasonably assumes your players are emotionally invested in finding him.

However, at this point, Damgaard is a peripheral figure, an instigator who got things rolling but is no longer necessary to eventuate the final evil. If the players no longer seem to care about him, it will still add coherence to the scenario if he shows up at some point.

So whenever they move from one location to another in the city, roll a die. On a 2 or lower, they literally bump into him while turning a corner. At this point, his symp is kicking back, enjoying the simple pleasures of human bodily existence before attending the final ritual and then returning to the swirling madness of the Outer Dark. Startled, he drops his *gelato al limone* and runs as fast as he can in the opposite direction. Pursuit as always plays out as an **Athletics** contest.

When caught, the symp inside Damgaard releases its hold and returns to the other side of the membrane. Damgaard's body suffers a cerebral hemorrhage. A Difficulty 6 **Medic** test stabilizes him, leaving him in a coma. Without it, he dies. In a hospital, a day or more later, a Difficulty 6 **Medic** test can return him to consciousness.

Forensic Psychology: The experience has severely damaged his mental processes.

Damgaard retains only hazy recollections of what his body did under symp control, as if the last few days have been an awful nightmare, now blessedly receding into memory. However, if loose ends still dangle at the scenario's conclusion, a bedside debriefing with Damgaard might tie them up.

As yet a third option, you may prefer the neatness of having Damgaard appear during the final ritual sequence, at which point the team can either kill or attempt to save him, as above.

Make the choice that feels like it will most satisfy the players.

SYMPONE / DAMGAARD

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 4, Scuffling 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

WEAPON: -2 (fists)

GIGGLER CRUCIBLE

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion

LEAD-INS: Pordenone Incidents, Running Into Damgaard

If four or more victims have already been killed by the giggler when the team arrives in town, the crucible ritual takes place the first evening after they discover that Enrico's brother Giustino enjoys access to the vehicles involved in the crashes.

If fewer than four victims are dead when the team arrives, the ritual occurs the night after the death of the fourth victim.

By this point the team may have figured out that they can kill all the giggers spawned by Damgaard's campaign, no matter where in the world they are, by allowing the ritual to start and then attacking it. Depending on the chronology, this may require them to allow one or more murders to take place before the ritual can happen. Expect this to trigger a harrowing moral debate. For extra points, make an effort to see that Raffaella Baroni winds up as one of the later victims.

(If your group prefers a horror-lite approach free of awful compromises, you could adjust the number of victims needed,





so that the team doesn't have to wait for more people to die before acting. Says the author, looking disapprovingly at your players over the rims of his spectacles.)

Difficulty 4 **Surveillance** at the police evidence garage eventually spots Enrico using his brother's keys to sneak off with bits of the subject vehicles in a wheelbarrow. Another Difficulty 4 **Surveillance** test follows him to a stretch of hillside where he intends to perform the ritual. Alternately a Difficulty 5 **Surveillance** test might allow them to track Damgaard there. In both instances, a failed attempt still gets them to the location, but alerts the subject to their presence. Team members may then need to somehow lull the conspirators into a false security sufficient to proceed with the ritual later. If the tracking occurs immediately before the ritual, Enrico and/or Damgaard still proceed, but gain initiative when the team attacks.

Bureaucracy used for a check of town records also locates the hillside spot as having belonged to Enrico's great-grandfather before the war.

If investigators go to the hillside when neither conspirator is present, they find a weird bowl-like structure made from the cars involved in the incidents to date.

Does the team not have the pipe clue from the prologue?

They can still find out that they can kill all gigglers worldwide by killing the spawning ODEs during the ritual. Observing Enrico as he goes about his endless daily business, they note that he frequently stops to scribble with a stubby pencil in a small leather-bound notebook. **Filch** as an Investigative ability gets it out of his pocket.

Alternately, **Intimidation** or **Reassurance** applied to Giustino, either threatening his brother's future or assuring him that this is the only way to protect it, convinces him to snag the notebook and turn it over.

Its densely packed scrawlings mostly concern themselves with bizarre ideological abstractions. As the pages go on they use more and more Esoterror keywords. The last pages consist mostly of indecipherable diagrams, including a rough sketch of what the crucible might look like. Written underneath this in block capital letters are the Italian words for:

"INTERRUPTION REVERSES EVERYTHING. DIE BEFORE ALLOWING INTERRUPTION!!!"

Should the investigators show up for the ritual, one giggler per player character manifests from the crucible. By killing all the gigglers they cause the hole in the membrane to seal up. Any gigglers spawned in connection to this particular clown fear flap die, no matter where on earth they happen to be. Clown pranks continue for a while, fizzling out without summoning any more of them. For this confrontation, but not otherwise, Enrico and/or Damgaard have armed themselves with stolen police sidearms.

One playtest group expressed disappointment when they realized that they had contained this incident but not all future giggler manifestations ever. Respond to similar objections by citing the Ordo Veritatis operations manual. Field agents are like medical teams flown in to tamp down an epidemic. No one expects them to cure the disease, just to suppress this particular outbreak. (The same objection applies to pretty much any Outer Dark infestation, really.)

HANDOUTS

Add dates to these handouts relative to the start you assign to your scenario.

- 1 May 30, last year.
- 2 June 7, this year.
- 3 day the team arrives in Newark
- 4 4 days into the Antagonist Timeline, as seen on p. 22.

MOTORIST SNAPS BIZARRE CLOWN PIC*Julie Chin for the Examiner*

Greasepaint and a red bulbous nose were no laughing matter for Bayonne residents Sid and Marcia Blackmun, who were startled by the roadside appearance of a man in full clown regalia near Port Terminal Boulevard last night. Marcia, in the passenger's seat, took a cell phone picture of the figure to turn over to police. "He was definitely adopting a menacing posture," Marcia said. "Like he might jump out in front of us, even drive us off the road," added Sid, a retired production engineer.

The appearance matches several other social media accounts of persons dressed as clowns roaming about at night. On Twitter, user @Salmonjack said "Bolting my door extra hard tonite. Roving clowns freak me out." Bayonne resident Tanya Evans posted a Facebook status asking if anyone else had seen a "scarcy [sic] clown by the TGIF parking lot." Contacted for further comment, she reported seeing a man in a yellow clown costume peering into cars from the shrubbery bordering the lot. When confronted by TGI Friday's staff, the man jumped onto a motorbike and sped off.

Bayonne Police Department spokesperson Stephanie Bates had this to say: "Anonymous prowling is no laughing matter. Though the individuals involved may think they're engaged in some kind of harmless prank or flash mob, they should be aware that by making themselves a cause for alarm they endanger both their own safety and that of the general public. Criminal mischief charges could result. So I urge whoever's doing this to immediately desist in their behavior."

Motorist Snaps Bizarre Clown Pic*Julie Chin for the Examiner*

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Everything Awful Please

COULROPHOBIA HANDOUT #2

Clown Brawl Breaks Out at Local Rock Club

Julie Chin for the Examiner

A RASH OF CLOWN SIGHTINGS engineered by an unknown group came to a head last night during a tussle at Avenue E rock tavern The Mud Pit. According to witnesses, three persons in clown makeup and costume were forcibly ejected by club bouncers prior to last call. "They were definitely adopting a swaggering, you could say even menacing, posture," said witness Melissa Kent, 23. "The bartender refused them service and they got rowdy."

Mud Pit proprietor Phil Gonzaga minimized the event. "We cater to a party crowd and every Friday and Saturday night someone gets booted. Nobody got hurt and there was nothing interesting about it except what they were wearing. And I don't even think it was all that interesting." Asked if police were called to the scene, Gonzaga reiterated "Nope, all in a night's work."

However, other witnesses who declined to be identified for this story indicated that the clowns were perhaps more roughly treated than the owner's account admits. With any luck, this might well be the end of Bayonne's clown outbreak.

CLOWN BRAWL BREAKS OUT AT LOCAL ROCK CLUB

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**LONG INACTIVE, BAYONNE MYSTERY
CLOWNS RESURFACE**

Julie Chin for the Examiner

Absent from the local scene since last June, Bayonne's mystery clowns are back, racking up a rash of sightings that lit up social media last night. A white-faced, red-nosed man in a yellow costume was spotted by numerous residents near the 5th St Connection. Other motorists noted the presence of a blue-clad, dreadlocked clown along Oak Street, and beside Old Hook Road. "Drove past a clown brandishing a big knife SUMBDUDDY CALL 5-o!" tweeted user @Chiscro.

"While users tweeted their alarm at these events," responded Bayonne Police Department spokesperson Stephanie Bates, "no one who called police services did so in a timely fashion. As a result officers were unable to locate any sign of the suspects. Again we reiterate to the persons involved that these activities endanger themselves and others and could result in criminal charges. And to the general public, we urge you not to treat social media as a substitute for contacting us directly should an emergency arise."

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Man Stung to Death by

COULROPHOBIA HANDOUT #4

hope for family to have a long and quiet life. Other motorists are cautioned against imitating his actions.

Leicester police issue clown caution

Menacing costumed individuals provoke warning to public

Press Association

A wave of intimidating actions by persons dressed as clowns has prompted the police force to warn the public against engaging with unknown persons bent on mischief.

Multiple members of the public in the Leicester area have reported hostile meetings with people garbed in Halloween-style clown costumes. They report being followed, chased, or growled at by these unidentified persons. One described their rubber masks as resembling "horror movie characters."

Police superintendent Jeremy Pinnock said that although these pranksters clearly desire attention, they are best countered by ignoring them. He added that no one has been harmed in these incidents. "For their own safety, I would strongly advise them to curtail their activities. In the end the danger they pose may be to themselves."

Pranksters should expect increased patrols in the days ahead.

The clown sightings have elicited much comment on social media, which may well be their goal. Twitter discussion has centred around the hashtag #LeicesterClowns.

It is not illegal to dress as a clown or to appear masked in public. However, should an attempt to startle passerby escalate in an undesirable direction, perpetrators could face criminal and/or civil sanction.

LEICESTER POLICE ISSUE CLOWN CAUTION

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GEOGLASHERS

DEADLY COINCIDENCE MARS THE EFFORTS OF THE WORLD'S LEADING Internet search provider to update its street view and satellite map images. Its cameras start finding the bodies of murder victims just as their photo vehicles drive by or their satellites whiz overhead. The first few really are unconnected, until Esoterror agents opportunistically jump into the incident and keep it going with fresh kills. The assignment: find out who's staging the slayings and stop them, before these arranged coincidences take on a supernatural life of their own.

This scenario centers around the mapping service of the world's leading search engine, associating it with murder and mayhem. We refer to it here as Waltz, a mutated acronym for world's leading search engine. If in the privacy of your own gaming chamber you revert the name and other details to that of the real-world company, nobody's trademark lawyers are ever going to track you down.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

The symp occupies a body chosen to push the sexual buttons of Vikas Mohan, the executive in charge of Waltz's mapping app. Getting his attention in the parking lot of the company's headquarters in Evergreen, CA, she gains an immediate interview with him, during which the symp transfers from her to him. Reserving the previous body to murder later, the symp then uploads a program to Waltz servers, physically locating it in a remote facility in Utah. Then, piggybacking on coincidental

incidents elsewhere, "Mohan" sets off three parallel waves of killings designed to be captured either by the company's street-view camera cars or its satellite imaging sweeps. Some of these the symp commits itself, hopping from body to body on a cross-country spree. Others are performed by otherwise unconnected Esoterror cells, who receive advance warning on the satellite imaging route. Outer Dark Entities, attracted by special red crystals Mohan hides in the wheels of the cars, kill for the benefit of street-view cameras. The plan seeks to weaken the membrane ahead of the great summoning due to occur in the final scenario, "Swallowed."

TRAIL OF CLUES

The case starts with **Folder Two**, as discovered in the prologue. Investigations in **Grand Forks** or **Lexington** may establish the ordinary, coincidental nature of the initial incidents inspiring the conspiracy. Going to **Evergreen** allows investigators to meet with Mohan, triggering various possibilities ranging from an escape and the start of a kill spree, or the capture of the symp. This determines what happens to the original host, who may wind up as **Luisa in the Trunk** or **Luisa on the Bleachers**. **What Mohan Left Behind** points to the nature of the scheme and ways to wind it down. **Mohan's Badge** allows the team to decontaminate the cars, ending the creature portion of the multipronged kill wave. **Ending the Wave** and **The Lehi Server** let them wrap up the rest.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

A team member who gets too close to the symp could wind up **Parasitized**. If the symp remains at large, it discards Mohan's body in **Hoist on His Own Streetcam**, with a possible continuing murder spree after that. **Red Bait** and **Killwave** detail the numerous subsidiary slayings (or reveals of already stashed bodies) carried out by creatures and cell members. **Monster Garage** shows what happens if agents' handling of the crystals in the Waltz car wheels attracts ODE interest.

SCENES

FOLDER TWO

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-OUTS: Grand Forks, Lexington, Evergreen

The video freeze-frame of folder two does not show the news article printout in its entirety. However, a simple search of the visible headline turns up the full piece, as provided in Geoslashers Handout #1 on p. 49.

Research: Similar search terms also turn up the article seen in the subsequent handout.

Based on these handouts, investigators might choose to start in Grand Forks, Lexington, or Evergreen.

GRAND FORKS

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Folder Two, Lexington, Evergreen

LEAD-OUTS: Lexington, Evergreen, Luisa on the Bleachers

Grand Forks, ND, is the hub of a greater urban area of about a hundred thousand people, in the flatlands of the Red River Valley. The University of North Dakota lends it a college town vibe. Though condo developments busily transform its historic downtown, rural poverty on its outskirts opens ample gaps for people to fall between.

By talking to people mentioned in Geoslashers Handout #1, the team can gather information about the events leading up to the satellite image. Mostly they learn that it lacks any obvious sign of supernatural or Esoterror activity. Although each interview unfolds as a separate scene, they occur in rapid succession and all confirm one another, and so for simplicity's sake appear together under a single umbrella header.

MADELINE ANKERS

Single mom Madeline Ankers works long hours as a data entry clerk for a nonprofit health care exchange in order to pay the rent on her trailer and raise her two sullen teenagers.

The additional publicity that came her way after the story about the satellite image broke another shovelful of hurt

and bitterness on her. She had no idea that going public about it would give the image wider circulation. So when investigators show up wanting to ask questions about it, she's tired of talking.

Cop Talk by characters presenting themselves as law enforcement appeals to her law-and-order values and gets her to reluctantly open up. Or they can use **Reassurance** to show that the team members hate the Internet and media as much as she does.

In response to specific questions she provides the following:

- ▶ Awful as the incident was, you couldn't call it weird or strange. Except for that terrible coincidence of the satellite passing by while cops were studying the crime scene, with poor Janis still lying there.
- ▶ Of course Underwood done it. Madeline warned her sister Janis a dozen times not to involve herself with that son of a bitch. She could tell he was trouble a mile away.
- ▶ The presiding officer on the case is Dale Engelstad. He's a good guy, and he has all he needs to put Underwood away for life.

DALE ENGELSTAD

Detective Dale Engelstad of the Grand Forks Police Department speaks slowly, with an easy-going manner belying his superlative arrest record. **Cop Talk** prompts him to treat the investigator using it as a colleague.

His answers to specific questions go something like this:

- ▶ They have Underwood dead to rights. Janis Ankers' blood was found throughout their shared dwelling, a ramshackle house out by Route 29, and in his clothing.
- ▶ A witness saw his truck leaving the sewage treatment facility shortly after the body was dumped.
- ▶ Repeated domestic dispute calls brought police out to the house. Janis filed charges once, but didn't show up to testify against him, leading to the case being dropped.
- ▶ The Waltz people maybe talked like a bunch of human press releases, but they were conscientious about taking the image down when they got wind of it.
- ▶ Nope, Grand Forks ain't the kind of place where weird occurrences occur.

As Dale is no dummy, he'll ask what interest the team has in the case. Return a slow skeptical nod if the explanation the group gives him comes off as shaky.

(Dale might make a good replacement PC, after Ordo recruitment, should one of the team fall in the course of this epic campaign. Obviously that can only happen after he appears as a GMC here.)

WILLARD UNDERWOOD

Assuming they don't arouse Detective Engelstad's ire, two team members can gain access to Underwood in a jailhouse interview. (Let other players feed questions to the point persons, out of character.)

The man they see sourly waiting for them is rangy and balding, sporting both ropy muscles and a beer gut.

Anthropology: His fading tattoos reveal that this isn't his first stint behind bars.

Pathology: He shows such physical signs of prolonged alcoholism as redness of the nose and cheeks, and a tendency to clutch at his gut that suggests chronic gastritis.

Trivia: One tattoo, which might to the uninitiated resemble an occult sign, is actually the logo of an '80s metal band.

Underwood starts with a tough front but, like many bullies deprived of his power, crumbles under **Interrogation**. Despite all the evidence, he continues to insist that he didn't do it.

- ▶ He doesn't know who did do it, but that's the cops' job, not his. As long as they're railroading him, they sure as hell won't find out, will they?
- ▶ Sure, he was out by the sewage plant the day she went missing. That's because whoever it was, was trying to frame him.
- ▶ Them calls Janis made to 911 were all made up. When she drank she liked to tell lies about him.

Bullshit Detector: He's lying out his ass.

Mean and ignorant but not actually stupid, Underwood listens acutely to the questions he's given in hope of finding something he can seize on as reasonable doubt. If they start to ask about weird occurrences, cultists, terrorists, or the paranormal, he strings them along, trying to figure out what they really want from him.

WRAPPING UP GRAND FORKS

After a while the group will hit a wall here and realize that the trail lies elsewhere. (For this reason, pace this alternate sequence, and the similar Lexington one, as briskly as you can.)

Occult Studies: This is starting to look like a classic Esoterror piggyback operation, leveraging anxiety about a random, mundane event into an operation that only later takes on supernatural resonance.

LEXINGTON

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Folder Two, Grand Forks, Evergreen

LEAD-OUTS: Grand Forks, Evergreen, Luisa on the Bleachers

The team can follow up Lexington leads by contacting people mentioned in Geoslashers Handout #2, on p. 50.

KENDALL WEEKES

Jaded local reporter Kendall Weekes considers the Hopkins murder a dead issue, unless the investigators make it seem otherwise with their interest in the case. His nose for a bigger story may make him an obstacle as they try to pry info from him without giving him cause to follow them around. In response to relevant questions, he reveals the following:

- ▶ The investigating officer is Tika Williams of the Lexington Police Force.
- ▶ Andre Hopkins left a widow, Elaine. The couple had children, but they live out of state and returned to their respective homes after the funeral.
- ▶ The cops are probably right about this being a simple robbery. Hopkins was shot in a bad part of town.
- ▶ When they do catch the perp, it will be because someone ratted on him, probably to escape a lesser charge in some unrelated matter.
- ▶ Weird occurrences? Something more than coincidental about the StreetWaltz image? Why do you say that? Who are you working for, really?

TIKA WILLIAMS

Detective Tika Williams, young for her rank, has already settled into the disappointing realities of homicide policing. **Cop Talk** lowers her reflexive suspicion of outside officials. Depending on what she is asked, she reveals:

- ▶ Andre Hopkins left a widow, Elaine. The couple had children but they live out of state and returned to their respective homes after the funeral. (Skip if Weekes already said this.)
- ▶ Her department has no suspect in the case and no useful physical evidence. Gunpoint robberies have been quiet in the neighborhood for the last while. Must be somebody new.
- ▶ She's confident she'll get the guy eventually. Someone will come forward. It's too bad the photo got taken down from the web right away. If the fuss had gone on longer it might have inspired an informant to pick up the phone.
- ▶ Weird occurrences? You mean, other than the precinct coffee tasting drinkable today?

If given the tip from Cordell Pelant (below) about Andre owing money to bookie Raymond Parkins, she goes off to interview him. It takes 2 points of **Cop Talk** to get invited along. The scene described in "Raymond Parkins" (below) unfolds, but with her and not the investigators taking the lead.

ELAINE HOPKINS

Elaine liked that young black detective who came around when her husband was gunned down, but in general doesn't trust the police. **Streetwise** allows a team member to show that what she says now won't get her into trouble. Likely answers to their questions:

- ▶ "Andre was a tired old man with diabetes and bad knees. He liked to warm a seat down at the Five Spot and watch his football games. He's never been involved in anything that's nobody's never mind."
- ▶ "We're good people but in a bad neighborhood, so the police didn't care very much what happens to us. They figure it's robbery, and robbery's hard to solve, so, far as they're concerned, that's the end of the story."

- ▶ “Maybe it was robbery, but I sure would like to see somebody pay for what they done to him.”

THE FIVE SPOT / CORDELL PELANT

The Five Spot is a worn-out sports bar catering to retirees and daytime drinkers. Its old man smell repels people under forty. When the investigators go in, they see a man drinking alone at a table by the door, a man drinking alone at the bar, and the bartender. Whichever one of these they approach first turns out to be named Cordell Pelant. He can tell you about everything that happens at the Five Spot, which is not to imply that anything ever happens at the Five Spot.

- ▶ Yeah, Andre liked his football all right. What else is there to like?
- ▶ Sure, Andre was in hock. In hock up to his eyeballs.
- ▶ Nope, if you don't know who runs the sports book around here, I sure ain't going to tell you.

Negotiation: (plus a discreetly palmed Benjamin (at least)) He owed more than three times the value of his house to Raymond Parkins. Ray's a patient man, but he was talking about making an example of somebody. After Andre got it, the rest of his deadbeat clients paid up right away, you can be damn sure of that. Parkins works out of a diner near the ball park on North Broadway.

RAYMOND PARKINS

Raymond Parkins, found making calls on three separate cheap cell phones, denies so much as knowing Andre Hopkins, setting off **Bullshit Detector** hard. Under **Intimidation** or **Interrogation** he admits to placing bets for a (nonexistent) bookie he declines to name but again denies any connection to Hopkins' murder. Morbidly obese, Parkins does not match the body type from the image.

As he's speaking, a young man who matches the shooter's build and wears the same basketball jersey, ambles blank-eyed into the diner. He spots the team bracing Raymond, turns tail, and runs.

Athletics, Difficulty 4, catches up with him. This is Raymond's nephew, Marcus, age seventeen. If caught he starts to cry. Unless stopped, Raymond tortuously runs toward him, shouting at him to keep his mouth shut. (None too bright, the Parkins clan.)

Interrogation: Marcus confesses to shooting Andre Hopkins at his uncle's behest. Having already spilled the beans, he asks to go into witness protection.

Although the team has found the killer (or watched as Tika Williams did), they've discovered that nothing about it smacks of the paranormal or Esoterror.

JESSE FREEMAN

Eager, bearded blogger Jesse Freeman reacts with enthusiasm to any chance to discuss his image discovery. If contacted by

email, he suggests meeting up at the Cup of Kindness, a hipster coffee joint on Mill Street. He happily reveals the following, in response to questions.

- ▶ He didn't know Andre Hopkins.
- ▶ After finding the murder picture, he decided not to check out apartments in that neighborhood.
- ▶ He got a number of odd messages when he posted the photo. Because, hey, Internet.
- ▶ Naturally he drilled down into the analytics for his post, in keeping with his aspirations as a social media consultant. He got hits from all around the world, mostly the US, the UK, Canada, Germany, and Japan.
- ▶ Ranking US states in order, Kentucky came first, naturally, then California and New Jersey.
- ▶ He got a whole ton of hits from a particular California ISP.
 - ▶ **Data Retrieval:** This matches the Powells' account in Irvine, CA.
- ▶ (pipe clue for “Swallowed”) Ever since he posted the image, he's been having weird dreams. Misshapen animal figures creep into his apartment at night to claw at his flesh. He tries to fight back and bursts one of them open by kicking at it. It explodes, like inside it's entirely made of some awful-smelling goop. Then later in the same dream, people enter the apartment, sedate him, and extract his blood. They look like they're Vietnamese or Thai or Cambodian or something like that.

WRAPPING UP LEXINGTON

The guidance given in “Wrapping up Grand Forks” (p. 35) applies here, too.

EVERGREEN

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Folder Two, Lexington, Grand Forks, Luisa on the Bleachers, What Mohan Left Behind

LEAD-OUTS: Lexington, Grand Forks, Capturing a Symp, Capturing a Host, Parasitized, Luisa in the Trunk, Luisa on the Bleachers, Mohan's Badge, What Mohan Left Behind, Hoist on His Own Streetcam

If the team came to Waltz's Evergreen campus straight from “Folder Two,” the symp has jumped from its first host to Vikas Mohan, and is now on the verge of killing original host Luisa Robles. He intends to leave the body out to be photographed by an impending StreetWaltz camera-car run but, until that happens, keeps her heavily sedated in the back of her car.

If the team arrives after going anywhere else first, Mohan has killed the original host and dumped her in a spot which was then photographed by the StreetWaltz vehicle. The photo will appear on the site within hours, having already been transferred from the car's hard drive to the main servers. Mohan's symp then jumped to yet another host.

THE SINISTER PLAN IN DETAIL

Weeks ago: Through paranormal surveillance of Mohan's Internet activity, the computer-dwelling ODE from the Powell house identifies his weakness for broad-beamed Latinas. It also develops code to drop into the software that manages Waltz's fleet of camera cars, and its satellite imaging.

After the massacre: SympTwo goes to Waltz headquarters in the body of sex club attendee Luisa Robles and approaches Vikas Mohan in the parking lot. She's his type, so he agrees to talk with her in his office about what he thinks is a proposed charity tie-in with the mapping app. SympTwo migrates from Robles to Mohan. Now in Mohan, SympTwo administers a powerful sedative to Luisa Robles and stashes her in Mohan's office closet. As Mohan, it overrides Waltz security protocols to upload the compromising code developed by the computer-resident ODE. It waits until after hours, then sneaks Robles' unconscious body out of the building and into his car. He drives her to his apartment, keeping her alive in an induced coma.

The compromised software begins to broadcast information on the routes for upcoming camera cars and the areas to be targeted for fresh satellite imaging.

A few days later: As Mohan, SympTwo covertly tampers with the fleet of StreetWaltz cars currently housed at the Evergreen campus. It places quantities of the red crystals from the folder into the wheel wells of the vehicles. These crystals draw ODEs to them, in this case with instructions

impelling them to kill or bring victims to leave along their routes, so that they'll be photographed at the exact right moments.

Some days later: Mohan puts the still comatose Robles in the trunk of his car. Unless the investigators prevent him, he takes her to a nearby location about to be photographed by a StreetWaltz car, slashes her throat, and leaves her bleeding out on a park bench. The car whizzes by and immortalizes the moment on its automated camera.

SympTwo returns to Waltz headquarters, then migrates into UPS driver Essie Cummings, taking a laptop containing the program allowing it to track the camera car routes and satellite targeting.

Thereafter: As Essie Cummings, SympTwo stages more murders to be caught on camera or satellite, sometimes jumping to a new host and making the old host his victim.

Meanwhile, cars fan out across the US, the crystals in their wheels attracting otherwise unconnected ODEs to commit murders and leave them out to be photographed.

Also meanwhile, otherwise unconnected Esoterror sleeper cells receive and install the tracking program, along with instructions telling them to kill people and leave them in particular locations at specific times.

Unlike the creatures, who react only to the cars, these cells place victims out for both the cars and satellite imaging.

In either case, the symp has already forced Mohan to add monitoring subroutines to the mapping app.

Mohan's responses depend on whether the symp still inhabits him.

See sidebar for an overview of the scheme, containing background facts that remain true in both situations.

STILL SYMPED

In this story branch, Mohan has Robles sedated in the trunk of his car in the parking lot, suffering dangerous dehydration under the sweltering heat. She lies wrapped in a sheet of plastic. A long, self-sharpening kitchen knife sits beside her, ready to be used to slash her throat.

At this key moment, SympTwo has no desire to meet unknown visitors. He has instructed his uber-efficient receptionist, Kara Saylor, to keep out anyone seeking an impromptu appointment. However, she relents in the face of credibly described uses of **Bureaucracy**, **Flirting**, or **Forensic Accounting**, letting some or all of the team in to confront him.

Mohan adjusts to their presence, inviting them to take seats on the long, swanky couch opposite his desk.

As the investigators are most likely asking background questions about the workings of StreetWaltz, SympTwo attempts to keep its cool and answer as an unaware Mohan would.

- ▶ Waltz uses its own fleet of street-level camera cars, but leases the services of a satellite imaging company, AeroMetriks, also of Evergreen. (You can see its glass and steel headquarters from the window of Mohan's office.)
 - ▶ (A character with **Forensic Accounting** knows that Waltz announced its acquisition of AeroMetriks just two days ago. If confronted with this fact, which the real Mohan would be up on, play SympTwo as momentarily baffled and distressed before recovering its composure. "Ah, it's been a distracting couple of days. It's, uh, been secret so long I forgot the press release had gone out.")
- ▶ Waltz keeps both the routes of its cars and its scheduled satellite sweeps strictly secret. This prevents pranksters and viral marketers from getting free attention by arranging for their billboards or protests or flash mobs or what-have-you to wind up on WaltzMaps.
- ▶ People complain when something inappropriate winds up on the app. The company's takedown speed falls well within industry standards.
- ▶ An actual human eyeball check on every single image would take an absolutely unaffordable number of staff hours, even if outsourced to a developing nation. The company relies on algorithms to protect privacy. Those get better and better

all the time. In the years ahead, they might also be able to identify and hold for screening distressing images, like those found in the Grand Forks and Lexington incidents. But the technology's not there yet, and whether Waltz is or isn't working on that is of course proprietary information.

- ▶ Mohan has no knowledge of anything unusual, paranormal, or untoward in connection with these incidents, or anything else for that matter.

All but the last of these statements is true. As for the final one, the dulled responses of a Symp victim do not provide the tells the Bullshit Detector depends on.

However, if a character with **Forensic Psychology** asks about Mohan's demeanor, he does seem to be exhibiting some ancillary symptoms of amnesia or dissociative identity disorder.

If confronted by the investigators in a way that makes the jig seem to be truly up, the symp freaks out. Depending on how the team has positioned itself, he either:

- 1 attacks them, trying to migrate into one of them (if some are sitting and some standing)
- 2 tries to flee out his office door (if everyone sat down)
- 3 rushes out the sliding door onto his balcony and leaps off it (if no one sat down)

In the first instance, he chooses the character with the lowest Athletics pool. That character makes a Difficulty 4 **Athletics** test.

The parasite flies out of Mohan, bursting the lower part of his face open.

On a success, the targeted character bats away the parasite as it flies from Mohan's shattered face. See "Capturing a Symp," opposite.

On a failure, the slug-like parasite sticks to the investigator's face long enough to slurp through his or her lips, breaking her teeth and crawling down into her esophagus. See "Parasitized," opposite.

Witnessing the face-bursting calls for a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 5 points.

In cases 2 or 3, the first player to say his character is doing so makes a Difficulty 4 **Athletics** test to restrain Mohan, preventing his escape. See "Capturing a Host," opposite.

If Mohan gets out the office door, SympTwo remains active for the rest of the scenario. It does not possess Essie Cummings but instead finds another host and sacrifices Mohan for a cam car or satellite. Improvise the mayhem it continues to wreak, in keeping with the sinister plan, until the investigators track it down and confront it.

If Mohan jumps off the balcony, they find his broken body sprawled across the chrome appendages of a large abstract sculpture in the courtyard below. The sculpture's spike-like protrusions pierce it in multiple places. This gory sight requires a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 4 points. Should they closely examine the body, the symp leaps out from Mohan's burst chest cavity to attempt to possess the team member conducting the probe. See above for avoiding parasitization.



POST SYMP

If the symp has already jumped from Mohan to UPS driver Essie Cummings, Mohan lingers as a shell of his former self. He mumbles his responses to basic questions as if drunk or lobotomized. Mohan yields passively to medical examination.

Pathology: He's dehydrated and seems to have suffered a stroke or cerebral hemorrhage. It might be possible to jump-start his awareness with a drug cocktail, but that could kill him.

If they try this, he at first can only say that everything feels fuzzy and dream-like, like he was living someone else's life for a while. Trying to remember hurts his head.

For each point of **Medic** the team elects to spend, Mohan supplies a single point of relevant information, which must be prompted by a related question.

Every two questions, have the character who spent the **Medic** point roll a die. On an odd result, Mohan slumps over and dies of a massive brain hemorrhage.

Causing Mohan's death risks a loss of 6 Stability (test Difficulty 4). Inspection of the corpse with **Forensic Anthropology** reveals that there was nothing the group could have done for him: the symp destroyed too much of his brain. If anything, keeping him occupied with questions may have prolonged his life, if only by moments.

- ▶ The last thing he remembers, he met a lady in the parking lot.
- ▶ There was something inside him, which could see into a terrible world beyond our own.
- ▶ That world is coming to this one, and they wanted to use the mapping program to bring that about.

- ▶ There were red crystals, and he was supposed to do something with them, or put them somewhere.
- ▶ Out there are all kinds of things, waiting to spring into action. Things and then people in league with the things.
- ▶ The thing inside him didn't know the people or the things, but didn't have to for the plan to work.
- ▶ It had him inject the lady with a drug and keep her in his apartment.

Depending on the current situation, only one of the following is true. Ignore the other.

- ▶ She's wrapped in plastic in the trunk of his car. Alive, he supposes, but probably not for long.
- ▶ He slashed her throat and stuck her on a park bench.

Mohan is in no shape to answer the quotidian questions above about Waltz and its mapping app, but his receptionist, Kara Saylor, can fill all that in — after someone calms her down with **Reassurance**.

CAPTURING A SYMP

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Evergreen

Use this free-floating scene if the group captures a symp in its exposed, slug-like state.

By itself, a symp can't communicate or do much but crawl around at a snail's pace.

If its overall plan might still be achieved, it remains active on this plane in the hope that some idiot will let it near a host, which it can then possess.

It can tell when its plan has been conclusively dashed. Its mind migrates back to the Outer Dark, and its body resolves into a rancid protein stew.

For all the investigators know, it has died, perhaps because it spent too long outside a host. In a long-running series, you could bring the same symp back in a later episode, either executing a different plan or simply seeking revenge for its previous humiliation.

Agents with a symp in a jar might get the bright idea of putting it in a host so they can interrogate it. If so, see "Capturing a Host," below. Engaging in this moral hazard entails a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 5.

A symp placed inside the corpse of a recently dead person can manipulate its vocal apparatus, managing a horrible parody of living speech. Observing this triggers a Difficulty 4/loss 5 Stability test. Refer to the interrogation notes below.

CAPTURING A HOST

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Evergreen

Use this free-floating scene if the group captures a host with the symp still inside.

If the host is a) un-sedated and b) able to face one or more captors, it bursts out of its host's face, trying to inhabit a captor instead. Use the notes on symp attack from "Evergreen," opposite.

A Difficulty 4 **Medic** test sedates the host, and the symp inside, for a number of hours equal to the margin, plus 1.

The medic can choose between complete unconsciousness and a suppressed, docile state.

While docile, the symp can be goaded into revealing one piece of information for each point of **Interrogation** spent.

It does everything it can to trick its captors into releasing it, or lowering the dosage of sedatives so it can burst out of its current host's face and attempt to possess someone else.

If its overall mission has been thwarted, which it can reliably intuit, the symp returns to the Outer Dark. Its slug body remains, dead, in the host. If not removed it metastasizes into a cancerous tumor. As mentioned under the previous header, you might bring this symp back for a sequel later.

PARASITIZED

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Evergreen

A symp taking an investigator as a host sets about doing whatever it can to further its current plan. In this case, it seeks out a murder opportunity coinciding with a satellite sweep or imminent StreetWaltz camera. If it lacks up-do-date information on a suitable location, it tries to get a computer and download the tracking software. This might reveal to the rest of the team the existence of the program, though it's a risky way to do it.

They might track a possessed host and find the software that way. Deliberately allowing a person to be taken over in order to follow the symp requires a Difficulty 4/loss 5 Stability test.

A parasitized character can be restrained and treated as a captured host, above.

To eject the symp from a host, flood the host with toxic chemotherapy drugs. On a Difficulty 4 **Medic** test, the symp body dies and the host survives.

The surviving host is reduced to maximum Health and Athletics pools of 4 for the duration of the *Worldbreaker* campaign. Give the player the option of creating a substitute character to step in while the main PC convalesces.

On a failed Medic test, the PC dies.

You might also decide to have a player play a substitute character while the main PC runs around with a symp inside him, committing Esoterror slayings.

LUISA IN THE TRUNK

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Evergreen, Mohan's Badge

LEAD-OUT: What Mohan Left Behind

If Luisa Robles is alive and still in the trunk of Mohan's car, the team can locate the vehicle in the parking lot with **Bureaucracy**, to get permission to access the company parking permit database.

They find her debilitated and in need of urgent care but still clinging to life. A Difficulty 4 **Medic** test stabilizes her. Otherwise she expires before paramedics arrive.

If they revive her on the scene, she has enough time to falteringly answer a few questions, the likely answers being:

- ▶ She is Luisa Robles, an American citizen who lives in Monterrey, Mexico.
- ▶ She works as a curator at its contemporary art museum.
- ▶ (requires **Reassurance** that no one is here to judge her personal life) Yes, she's involved in the lifestyle and went to San Francisco for a little fun.
- ▶ She remembers nothing clearly after the white people came in with the guns.
- ▶ There was something inside her, a fragment of an ancient, terrible intelligence.
- ▶ It used her as a puppet and then intended, from the safety of another form, to slash her throat and put her on display.
- ▶ It sees itself as an artist, and human flesh and civilization as a canvas to deconstruct.
- ▶ It is making a map, and inviting others like it, but also not like it, to collaborate with it.

Once she's at the hospital, doctors restrict access to her until she's out of intensive care.

LUISA ON THE BLEACHERS

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Lexington, Grand Forks, Evergreen, What Mohan Left Behind

LEAD-OUTS: Evergreen, What Mohan Left Behind, Hoist on His Own Streetcam

If the group becomes stumped or faces delays in Lexington or Grand Forks, **Research** alerts them to a fresh case fitting the MO.

Alternately, they might get the alert in the aftermath of their meeting with Mohan. At this point they may not suspect him, might have had his face explode and fire a parasite at one of them, or may be at some point in the middle of that continuum. Two days elapse between the murder and the image appearing on the mapping application. If the players previously specified that they used **Data Retrieval** to create a program to search new Waltz map images for anomalies, they learn of it as soon as

it posts. Otherwise another day passes before Lexington blogger Jesse Freeman (p. 36) spots it. He has become an obsessive checker of new map images.

If the group has already established friendly relations with Jesse, he alerts them and offers to hold the image for a while before posting it.

If not, he posts it to his site and **Research** turns it up.

THE IMAGE

Although the face has automatically been blurred, the person propped up on the bleachers next to a ball diamond in a park on San Jose's Waller Street is clearly drenched in a red liquid. The body has been placed facing the street, and therefore the camera.

Research finds numerous reports of this gruesome and public body display, in a quiet, upscale suburban area. According to them the victim remains unidentified and police are not talking about any leads. The articles identify the investigating officer as Detective Cesar Lozano.

DETECTIVE LOZANO

Cop Talk wins the team access to detached but hardworking Detective Lozano, who complains about the kale smoothies his wife makes for him to drink out of his ever-present Thermos. He admits that they have zero leads and are no closer to identifying the victim than when they started. She fits no local missing persons reports. The way the body was left out in public, to be discovered by a girl's baseball team no less, points to a serial killer. No open cases fit this profile.

Forensic Psychology: If this is a serial killer without any other known murders, the slaying shows a surprising confidence and efficiency. Normally a first kill occurs close to the serial killer's home, targets a person known to him, and is carried out hastily. This is probably an ODE or ODE-inspired event bearing only surface resemblances to a serial killer's MO.

Lozano grants them access to the autopsy report and the body, which remains in the morgue pending a next of kin coming forward.

Her face matches the sex club freeze-frame.

Occult Studies: The parasite must have migrated to another host, then killed her.

Forensic Anthropology: Her throat was cut open in a single, confident stroke from a self-sharpening kitchen knife.

THE STREETWALTZ ANGLE

The team might contact Mohan, who they either don't suspect or haven't met yet. If they do, the events described in "Evergreen" occur: he may successfully pass as an ordinary tech exec, or reveal himself as a symp, with several already described plot branches leading out from that.

If that bit has already happened, the team reaches his receptionist, Kara Saylor, who is taking care of office affairs while the company searches for a replacement (and circles the wagons with a passel of lawyers).

Whoever it is, the contact allows them to talk to the driver of the vehicle that took the shot. That's Ronnie Nkosi, a soft-spoken young man who learned to be nervous around tough-seeming people during his early childhood in a South African slum. He's afraid he'll somehow be scapegoated for the incident, even though he's done nothing wrong, and requires **Reassurance** before revealing anything beyond the basics. Not that he has much to add:

- ▶ He keeps his eye on the road. It's the cameras mounted atop the car that look from side to side.
- ▶ If he had seen the dead lady, yes of course he would have stopped and called 911.
- ▶ He drives especially carefully in neighborhoods like this.
- ▶ You know, neighborhoods where people see a face like his and tense up.
- ▶ He doesn't pick the routes or schedules. He doesn't even get them more than a day in advance.
- ▶ (core) He drove the route that was given to him. The company programs it right into his GPS, so he can't go wrong. Well, it sometimes goes wrong, but it didn't on this occasion.

Saylor, or an unsuspected Mohan, confirms that the mapping software automatically generates routes for the camera car drivers. Even within the company, only a few people can access the route ahead of time, not that they necessarily do. No one accessed Ronnie's route before it was auto-generated and wirelessly uploaded to his vehicle's GPS unit.

(core) **Data Retrieval:** (free with permission from Kara, 1-point spend if hacking Waltz's system) Mohan accessed the route file, searching all upcoming routes within driving distance. He did this from his personal laptop, not from the office.

Bureaucracy or **Negotiation** convinces Kara or the higher-ups at Waltz to reroute the StreetWaltz cars. This prevents any further murders by the symp. However, the red crystals are still in the cars, attracting ODE killings.

It takes 2 points of **Bureaucracy** or **Negotiation** to get Waltz to pull the fleet entirely. Unless they have the clue from "Mohan's Badge" and know to remove the crystals from the cars, this moves the murder from various random street locations to the Waltz garage; see "Monster Garage."

MOHAN'S BADGE

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Evergreen, Hoist on His Own Streetcam

LEAD-OUTS: What Mohan Left Behind, Luisa in the Trunk, Killwave, Hoist on His Own Streetcam

Electronic Surveillance: A record of Mohan's movements into secure points on the Waltz campus ought to be accessible in the company database.

After they check: But he has erased those records. Even so, they should be recoverable from the chip in his smart ID badge.

Mohan wears the badge on his person, which can be gained during "Evergreen" in various ways:

- ▶ plucking it from his shattered corpse
- ▶ taking it from him when the team captures him
- ▶ Difficulty 4 **Filch** test to take it from his person when he is still up and perky

It is also on him if he winds up dead later, in "Hoist on His Own Streetcam."

Data Retrieval: The chip reveals his movements through various secure turnstiles throughout the campus. Conferring with Kara Saylor, none of these seem irregular.

(core) However, it also shows him physically entering the Waltz garage facility where it stores its fleet of camera cars when not in use.

This is unusual, Kara confirms.

The garage is located about an hour's drive away. If the team travels there, laconic operations manager Luther Drake says that Mohan did show up at closing time *x* days ago. (Where *x* coincides with the day Mohan met Luisa.) Luther did not challenge his boss when he said he'd be staying after hours for a spot inspection.

Electronic Surveillance: The digital files for the security cam footage corresponding to Mohan's time in the garage have been wiped.

Data Retrieval: But they can be recovered. They show Mohan spending most of a late night removing the car's tires and placing red crystals in the wheel wells.

Shown this evidence, Waltz higher-ups agree to pull all the camera cars Mohan tampered with. Ordering the crystals removed from the cars and frozen ends the ODE part of the "Killwave" (see below.) Recalling them to the garage without neutralizing the crystals leads to the "Monster Garage" scene.

WHAT MOHAN LEFT BEHIND

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Evergreen, Luisa in the Trunk, Luisa on the Bleachers, Mohan's Badge, Hoist on His Own Streetcam, Killwave

LEAD-OUTS: Evergreen, Luisa in the Trunk, Luisa on the Bleachers, Hoist on his Own Streetcam, Red Bait, Killwave, Ending the Wave, The Lehi Server

Mohan lives in a suburban bungalow near the Waltz campus.

Forensic Accounting: It may look modest, but the property values around here have skyrocketed due to the presence of tech firms.

If Mohan isn't present, 1 point of **Infiltration** gets the team past his security system. Breaking in without his knowledge when he is home requires a Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** success.

Has the symp been inside him for more than a few days? The team finds his house in disarray. Perishable foods in his

fridge have gone bad. Cereal and rice lie around the floor like a horde of rats got into it. (This particular symp knows that its vessels have to eat but has yet to quite puzzle out the subtleties of ingestion.)

In his home office they find his laptop.

Data Retrieval: He uploaded a program to the Waltz servers shortly after his initial encounter with Luisa.

Cryptography: That program is deeply strange. It looks like its code is encrypted. On closer examination, it's written in a heretofore unknown language.

When this code is introduced into that of any program in any language, the otherworldly machine language spreads through it, mutating the host program. It is less a computer virus than computer cancer.

The code paranormally manifests the madness and sadism of the Outer Dark. Attempting to understand it exposes the mind to destabilizing hallucinations and impulses toward violence and self-harm. A character studying it for more than half an hour makes a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 4. Each hour after the first brings on another test, with both Difficulty and loss escalating by 1 each time.

(core) **Data Retrieval:** Mohan placed the code on a particular Waltz server, physically located in Lehi, UT.

Research: Lehi is a small town on the highway between Salt Lake City and Provo.

Data Retrieval: The program can be expunged from other servers, but due to its supernatural potency the connection between the Lehi server farm and Waltz's many other facilities can't be severed remotely. After a few minutes, it sends new copies of itself to the other servers. That drive will have to be physically unplugged from the server rack.

Occult Studies: That hazardous computer code can't be allowed to fall into untrained hands. The team will have to impound the possessed server itself.

In Mohan's freezer the team finds the baggie of red crystals seen on the sex club footage. Only a few of the crystals remain. However, the next time they look, they see that the crystals have reproduced themselves. (This explains why the team can still have access to crystals, should they seek it, in "Swallowed.")

These crystals attract ODEs already manifest on earth, unless another ODE is already nearby, or the crystals are kept at or below the freezing point. See "Red Bait" if the team lets it thaw out and moves it to another location. (Residual Outer Dark energy at Mohan's prevents it from triggering attacks here.)

HOIST ON HIS OWN STREETCAM

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Evergreen, Luisa on the Bleachers, Mohan's Badge, What Mohan Left Behind

LEAD-OUTS: Mohan's Badge, What Mohan Left Behind

This scene occurs if Mohan gets away from the team in "Evergreen," allowing the symp to jump to UPS driver Essie Cummings.

In the body of Cummings, a ponytailed sun-worshiper with a hiker's physique, the symp grabs a disoriented Mohan and snaps his neck. It then drives in Cummings' truck for thirteen hours to Idaho Falls. Cummings waits another day, props Mohan's car against the back of a pick-up truck in a dead-end laneway and departs, just in time for a WaltzStreet car to whiz by.

This car does not have crystals in its wheel wells. It was scheduled to make this camera pass at this time as of Mohan's last check of the routes.

(core) If the team is monitoring all incoming images for murder scenes, they spot Mohan's body an hour after the shot is taken and can precisely pinpoint its location. "Mohan's Badge" is on the corpse.

If the team has already arranged the rerouting or recall of all camera cars (much less likely without the badge), the symp doesn't know that and dumps the body anyway. The body has Mohan's ID on it, so the agents can find out about it after local police call their Evergreen counterpart Cesar Lozano about it.

Forensic Anthropology: Mohan died of a cervical fracture thirteen to twenty-four hours before it was dumped here. Lividity suggests that the body was laid out flat on its back for the intervening period.

If the team performs an autopsy, no sign remains of the symp, aside from an extra cavity hollowed out in his chest.

They might have learned enough about symps at this point to realize what this means: that instead of returning to the Outer Dark and leaving a malignant tissue mass behind, it has hopped to another host.

In this story branch, the symp continues to follow its MO until the camera car routes are altered, at which point it gives up and migrates back to the Outer Dark.

That modus operandi is:

- 1 find a new host
- 2 overwhelm the old host when it is still dazed from the transfer
- 3 break its neck
- 4 drive at least half a day to another spot about to be photographed by a camera car
- 5 dump the body
- 6 repeat stage 1

It keeps Essie's UPS truck, which is so ubiquitous that police never spot it, even when they are told to be on the lookout for one.

The team will likely focus on the broader kill wave rather than concentrating solely on the manhunt for the symp. Improvise

new symp kills as needed. Catching the symp doesn't end the crisis, so if the players are dedicated and smart about doing that, see to it that it happens in an exciting way and allows them to quickly get back to the rest of the epidemic.

RED BAIT

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-IN: What Mohan Left Behind

Just as the red crystals in StreetWaltz cars impel nearby ODEs to kill victims and drag them out to be photographed, any crystals the investigators carry around with them do the same. The ODE does not know about the camera cars and so may leave out a corpse even with none of them in sight.

At a suitable moment, an organ grinder lurches into view and runs toward the team member carrying the crystals. If attacked, it fights back. In the unlikely event that the group lets it run all the way up to the team member in question, the mammoth, devouring creature vomits up the pulverized remains of an entire person, then turns face and thunders away. If attacked while leaving, it fights back.

The organ grinder appears on p. 66 of *The Book of Unremitting Horror*. A gargantuan humanoid whose face consists entirely of a devouring maw, and with metallic arms terminating in a nail gun and a circular saw respectively, it embodies the devouring principle. Attraction to the crystals alters its usual habits, as it does with various other ODEs attracted to the StreetWaltz fleet.

Simply seeing the creature calls for a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a loss of 4. Having it vomit up a victim at one's feet entails a loss of 5. Fighting it ups the possible loss to 7.

Organ grinders are extremely tough opponents. Indicate as much to the player whose character background most suggests late nights spent poring through OV threat manuals. This might induce the group to find some less direct way of taking it down. Driving a heavy vehicle into it requires a Difficulty 4 **Driving** test, costs it 12 Health, and ignores its armor. If you tone the creature down for a smaller or less combat-oriented set of agents, the players probably won't complain. They will, however, likely assume the next organ grinder you throw at them will prove just as easily overcome.

ABILITIES: Athletics 20, Health 25, Scuffling 20, Shooting 20

HIT THRESHOLD: 2

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: -4

WEAPON: +3 Scuffling (circular saw); +3 Shooting (nail gun)

ARMOR: +3

As with many of the creature encounters in this scenario, a fight gone awry might require the replacement of dead agents with new player characters.



KILLWAVE

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Mohan's Badge, What Mohan Left Behind

LEAD-OUT: Ending the Wave

Until the team intervenes, creatures and hitherto dormant Esoterror cells alike go on parallel killing sprees. Human agents of the Outer Dark kill victims and leave them out for satellite photography. Attracted by the crystals in the wheels of StreetWaltz cars, ODEs break from their usual behavioral patterns to head for them and then look for victims to opportunistically kill. Or sometimes they drag out corpses they have already been playing with.

Because they're triggered by ground vehicles rather than satellites, the creature killings occur in a smaller zone than the satellite murders. They are presented here in chronological order but without specific times, so you can pace them as desired. Space these incidents out so that the team has time to take each one in, while feeling pressured as they pile up. Going to each scene gives the group scarcely enough time to arrive at one before another killing pops up elsewhere.

CREATURE KILLING #1: VISALIA, CA

Scaulers (*The Esoterrorists 2nd Ed.*, p. 63) swarm up from a sewer grate to attack postal carrier Ernest Berry, 56. They leave his battered body smeared across a busy street, his blood leaving long skid marks as if he was hit by a motorcycle and dragged. And then hit by another motorbike coming from another direction and dragged further. And then from yet another bike, coming at him from an impossible angle, as if it phased through the side of

the building. Traumatized onlookers report seeing blurry, fast-moving creatures coming up from below the sidewalk to attack him. They look like winged, toothy phalluses, recounts witness Shelia Fitzgerald, a marine biologist.

CREATURE KILLING #2: ELKO, NV

Satellite imagery captures the dismembered bodies of Elko County sheriff's deputies Caleb Butler and Kelvin Leonard, along with an unidentified third man, lying strewn around their wrecked vehicle. Also totaled at the scene is a carpet-cleaning van containing the bodies of its owners, Dat, Ruth, and Mike Tran. The police vehicle's dashboard camera shows the van suddenly swerving at it at top speed. In the passenger seat sits another man, who can later be identified as insurance claims adjuster Santos Ortega, holding a pistol to Dat Tran's head. The van collides with the police vehicle, which flips over. Upside down, the camera then shows a woman leaving the back door of the police vehicle. The woman, bartender Ramona Carr, had just been arrested by Butler and Leonard for vandalizing the home of her former domestic partner. Carr, who lurches stiffly at first but soon recovers her equilibrium, drags Ortega's body out onto the roadway by its foot. She flips him over, finds a hatchet duct-taped to Ortega's back, removes it, and commences to chop up his body, then the two sheriffs. She is about to do the same to the bodies of the Trans when another sheriff's vehicle shows up. The deputies can testify to what happened next: Carr brandished her axe, and they shot her down.

The StreetWaltz car veered through the scene just moments before the second police vehicle arrived, capturing the dismemberment at its apex.

Subsequent autopsies have been complicated by the mysterious disappearance of medical examiner Dr. Frances Jefferson. She and her team got as far as sorting out the various bodies, and noting that Ortega's heart did not seem to be among them. Then, while the others were on break, she cracked open Carr's chest. The examining room camera captures Jefferson lurching back, dropping out of view, then rising and heading briskly for the exit. Carr's heart is also nowhere to be found.

If the team cross-references body-controlling ODEs and the word "heart" in the Ordo database, they come up with several case file hits suggesting that this might be the work of a Returner, as seen on p. 62 of *The Esoterrorists 2nd Ed.*

CREATURE KILLING #3: PRESCOTT, AZ

As a StreetWaltz car approaches, an eighteen wheeler shoots out of its lane and crunches into oncoming traffic. The camera car escapes unharmed but captures a fiery explosion as the truck takes out four other vehicles.

Forensic Anthropology: Well crisped as his body might be, an autopsy can still determine that truck driver Ted "Big T" Soren died of a heart attack behind the wheel.

A check of Soren's schedule, hauling a shipment of chairs to a furniture store in San Bernardino, shows him to have strayed from what would have been the most efficient route that day.

A search of his seldom-used San Diego apartment turns up a browser history devoted to insomnia cures.

Electronic Surveillance: Soren's cloud-stored documents include a detailed dream diary of horrific nightmares, which he is certain are caused by a parasitic entity from another realm of existence.

Soren was afflicted by a dream tearer (*The Book of Unremitting Horror*, p. 35), which would have happily gone on tormenting him for weeks or months to come. Instead, beckoned by the red crystals, it sacrificed itself to cause Soren's cardiac arrest.

CELL KILLING #1: OMAHA, NB

The satellite photographs the body of University of Nebraska Omaha student Susan Lee, left splayed out atop the campus library.

Fingerprinting: Partial prints on the knife used to stab her, which other techs missed, match a student named Lane Verela.

Lane turns out to be head of the university's men's rights organization, recently defunded by university administrators for encouraging online harassment of the campus feminist group.

Susan's roommate, Rebecca Gray, reveals that Lane hit on both of them, ineptly and repeatedly. They made their repugnance for him loud and clear. She needs **Reassurance** before revealing this, because it could just as easily have been her, and she wants to blot that out.

Data Retrieval: His Internet search history reveals not only an epic trail of misogynistic trolling, but a recent obsession with sex magick.

The latter interest appears to have been hampered by the chronic lack of a sexual partner.

Under **Interrogation** Verela admits to the crime, then warns the group that they'll soon be crushed, along with all the other pussy-whipped morons who stupidly let the patriarchy die. On a 1-point spend, he admits to having been in online communication with a network of sorcerers. In exchange for his cooperation when needed, they promised him control over the desires of women, and a harem of slaves when they take over the world. This is about to happen, he assures investigators, eyes insanely gleaming.

Searches of the dorm rooms of fellow MRA activists Buck Burnham and Seymour Thurman with **Evidence Collection** turn up Lee's blood on their clothing as well.

None of them are aware of other Esoterror cells.

CELL KILLING #2: GRAFTON, OH

The satellite photographs an open sleeping bag containing skeletal remains beside a creek.

Forensic Anthropology: Dental records identify him as missing ex-convict Joseph "Yo Bull" Winters. He served a stretch in the nearby Grafton Correctional Institute for aggravated assault and drug trafficking. He's been missing for nearly two years, and was last seen after visiting his incarcerated cousin DeShawn Winters in the prison parking lot.

With little more than six thousand residents, Grafton is small enough to make feasible a global **Electronic Surveillance**

intercept of its Internet activity. This reveals that a small group of people have been searching terms like “murder,” “satellite,” and “skeleton” as if expecting them to pop up in the news. (Presumably the agents have now prevented murder images from hitting the map app. If this is so, the searchers keep looking in vain for their handiwork. If not they instead pull it up again and again, to exult in their grim achievement.)

This activity points to a coterie of guards at the jail: Morris Purdue, Donald Aguilar, Willie Hogan, and Marlene Buchanan. Searches of their computers turn up the program alerting them to the satellite photography schedule.

Under **Interrogation**, the first guard the team chooses to interview reveals that DeShawn Winters blinded one of their colleagues two years ago. So they took out his cousin, who was also a threat while behind bars. They stored the body under the floorboards of Hogan’s fishing shack. It was Purdue’s ex-wife who introduced him, and through him the others, to Esoterror. They claim to have ritually triggered a rash of fatal diseases in current and former inmates, all of whom deserved it. Some feared exposure when an unseen entity contacted them and instructed them to reveal Yo Bull’s remains according to a particular schedule. But then it promised them the power of “death at a glance” if they cooperated, and cancer for all of them if they refused.

Purdue’s ex-wife Lurene has dropped out of sight. He figures she’s changed her name, probably multiple times, since she took off. She’s a loose thread, but if the team seems really intent on finding her you might be able to weave her in somewhere — perhaps having her surface as one of the addled celebrants at the end of “Swallowed.”

CELL KILLING #3: CARIÑENA, SPAIN

The next satellite image appears on the other side of the Atlantic. It’s the headless body of anthropologist Javier Savall, on the roof of the municipal government building for Cariñena, a postcard town near Zaragoza.

Forensic Anthropology: He’s been dead for months, his remains preserved in brine. Essentially, somebody pickled him.

Anthropology: Savall lectures at the University of Barcelona and has published several books on the antiquity, or lack thereof, of European goddess worship.

He was killed by a group of mostly unwitting Esoterror operatives. Senior citizens Isabel Bordo, Anna de Bigas, and Nadia Oros have long covertly practiced folk magic for their contemporaries. Most of their clients are women seeking help with straying husbands, financial difficulties, or an array of ailments. Local men pay little attention to them, but, for Javier Savall, they represented informants to be cultivated for his work.

Unfortunately for him, a young recent addition to the group, Isabel’s grandniece Maria Alcaine, learned more than animal husbandry when she went away to study at the Swedish Institute of Agricultural Sciences. While in Uppsala she came into contact with an Esoterror cell, bringing the movement back home with her. The elderly ladies of the folk magic circle happily accepted

her help and desire to listen. She then turned them subtly, one ritual at a time, to Esoterror. At first they resisted the drift toward vengeful black workings. But once they got thinking about it, their little town was rife with thoughtless, aggressive, and thoroughly nasty people who could do with a curse or two.

When Savall came creeping around asking questions, Maria killed him with a hypodermic full of horse tranquilizer. Together they dedicated his corpse to the crone aspect of the triple goddess, and set it aside for use in future rituals. That use has now come.

Chemistry: Asking who in town does a lot of pickling might point in the killer’s direction.

On a canvass of food stores, Isabel and friends are easily identified as the town’s leading makers of preserves and sauces. Any of them, except for Maria, who immediately makes herself scarce, yields readily to **Interrogation, Intimidation, or Reassurance**, and confesses all. To this day none of them know about Esoterror or the membrane, but they have seen some pretty strange beings summoned during the rituals Maria taught them. She was the one who told them to leave out the body, because the goddess was going to look down from the sky to see it.

You might treat Maria as a dangling thread or bring her back in a later episode. She could show up as one of the ritualists in “Swallowed.”

If the group needs a local translator/facilitator, they’re met on arrival in Spain by Ordo operative Lucia Llanos, a tall, brusque woman. Lucia is a statistician by trade and a karate fighter by vocation.

AND SO ON...

Create additional incidents along these lines, as required, until the Waltz servers stop tasking satellite imaging and the fleet of contaminated cars is recalled. An efficient group might do this before you have to invent any.

MONSTER GARAGE

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

This scene occurs if the team has the camera cars recalled to the Waltz garage in Evergreen without having the red crystals removed from the wheel wells.

If the team stays in the garage as the altered cars arrive, they are present when a swarm of ODEs attacks the place. Torture dogs (see *The Esoterrorists 2nd Ed.*, p. 64) come smashing through the facility’s metal garage door, leaping for the people closest to the vehicles. Depending on how the players have described their actions, these may be investigators or garage personnel. The number of creatures equals the number of players present for the session (whether their characters are on site or not), minus 1.

GLITCHES

Sara_gulch: Srsly dudes freaking out here!!
Tr1st^N: What the what go to bed
Sara_gulch: No I got malware and now they're in my room.
Tr1st^N: In UR room?
Sara_gulch: Shimmering in the corner there. Waiting to pounce. Full of murder.
Tr1st^N: OK, you fucking with me
Sara_gulch: No no not kidding help me
Tr1st^N: Is there really someone in yr place? CALL COPS!
Sara_gulch: Cops can't help with this!!! Can U access my laptop remotely, remove the code?
Tr1st^N: NOT FUNNY
Sara_gulch: NOT KIDDING OMG IT TOUCHED ME
Tr1st^N: Jesus!!
Sara_gulch: Still have that program installed you used to fix registry problem last year right?
Tr1st^N: GET OUT OF THERE
New User: Hey Tr1st^N whaddup?
Tr1st^N: Hey who are U?
New User: Where du U live Tr1st^N?
Tr1st^N: How did you get on here this is a private channel
New User: Tell me where U R you'll find out
Tr1st^N: Sara where are you? U afk?
New User: Sara gone now Tr1st^N tell me where U live
Tr1st^N: Sara gone? What are you talking about? Who R U?
New User: I am your dreams, Tristan Murphy of 89 Water Run Drive, Hagerstown Maryland.
Tr1st^N: What the fuckkkk??
New User: Coming over. Bringing friends.
 — transcript of Instant Messenger chat, 110215

Ritualistic subroutines written into malicious code summon glitches from the Outer Dark to earthly computer systems. Once operative in a single operating system, they can jump to other devices connected to the original by a Wi-Fi or ethernet link. They collect fears and anxieties heightened or generated by the Internet and use them as psychic weapons against the users of the devices they infect.

On their own, glitches pose a limited operational challenge to the Ordo Veritatis. They typically kill every user of a linked set of devices and melt away, leaving agents to perform a Veil-Out and pronounce the case closed. The Ordo liaises with major virus protection companies to keep defenses against copies of glitch-generating software robust and up to date.

When glitches do endanger investigators, it is when they are used by Esoterrorists or other ODEs to protect computers used in some grander scheme. As in this scenario, they act as secondary antagonists, getting between agents and hardware they need to destroy.

The creatures can sense when enemies are about to remotely disable devices they reside in, and can teleport to wherever they are to attack them.

Glitches manifest as insubstantial, distorted humanoid forms. Their surfaces read to the human eye as pixelly and ever shifting. Barely discernible horrific images, always drawn from real life, flit across them. The victim confronted with a glitch might catch near-subliminal flashes of crime scenes, autopsies, war footage, and terrorist executions.

Glitches lash out with their arm-like appendages. Victims feel their blows psychically, but not physically. When struck by a glitch, the victim experiences a devastating hypnagogic flash of real-world violence taken from the Internet, momentarily overriding conscious vision.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12

HIT THRESHOLD: 4 (insubstantial)

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: +0 (psychic swipe)

ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting, +3 vs. Scuffling

SPECIAL ABILITY: When a glitch hits, it reduces the victim's Stability instead of Health. However, when a hit from a glitch reduces a PC to 0 or less, the character suffers physical, not mental, harm.

- ▶ When reduced in this way to 0 to -5 Stability, the victim is **hurt** (not shaken) and must make a Consciousness roll, but with the Stability as the tested ability and the absolute value of current Stability as the Difficulty.
- ▶ When reduced by a glitch hit to anywhere from -6 to -11, the victim is **seriously wounded** but does not acquire a mental illness.
- ▶ When reduced by a glitch hit to a Stability of -12 or less, the victim drops dead from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Characters can spend Shrink points at a rate of 1 to 1, to regain Stability points lost to glitches (but not pre-existing Stability losses) during a fight with them. This does not cost an action.

Although GMCs do not normally have Stability pools, assign pools to any who are present in a scene if they're to be attacked by glitches, with the PCs trying to get in their way. GMCs die when their Stability pools fall to 0.

SPECIAL MEANS OF DISPATCH: If a player surmises that creatures that make psychic attacks might be vulnerable to focused willpower, tell them that they can spend Investigative ability points on Scuffling tests against the creatures.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 9

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

WEAPON: +1 (drill), +3 (mandibles)

ARMOR: +2 vs. Shooting, +1 vs. Scuffling

Otherwise the team hears second hand from Kara Saylor that something terrible has happened at the garage. They return to find the pulped remains of Luther Drake and various drivers strewn about the garage. This requires a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 6.

If they don't then clear out and freeze the crystals, more attacks occur until they do. They probably will, so what this might look like as an ongoing problem we leave up to you to improvise.

ENDING THE WAVE

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion (part A)

LEAD-IN: Killwave

LEAD-OUT: The Lehi Server

Withdrawing the contaminated StreetWaltz cars ends the creature-driven half of the rampage.

Human cells keep killing until their feeds containing information on the satellite routes go dead. This happens when the team disables the corrupted server, or when they convince the Waltz CEO not only to change the satellite routes, but to suspend mapping altogether.

CEO Logan Kyung resists calls to shut down the satellite mapping altogether. He restricts his position to vague generalities, which can be hard to counter.

Forensic Accounting: Waltz has just launched an ad campaign touting the accuracy and currency of the information on its mapping app. He and another Silicon Valley behemoth are engaged in a high-profile struggle over whose maps are best, and shutting down the satellite program will put his company behind, maybe permanently.

It costs a 4-point spend of **Forensic Accounting**, **Negotiation**, or **Reassurance** (combined spends permissible) to get him to shut down the program after only one of the killings listed in "Killwave" or "Red Bait." After each additional slaying, subtract 1 from the spend cost.

If they don't already know about the Lehi server, they learn about it here, most likely from Kara Saylor but maybe from Kyung.



THE LEHI SERVER

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion (part B)

LEAD-INS: What Mohan Left Behind, Ending the Wave

An anonymous warehouse in the middle of a bland industrial park shelters Waltz's servers in Lehi, UT. As befits that spacious state, the park consists of several single-story buildings, all widely separated by a meandering road.

Other businesses in the same complex are:

- ▶ Watson's Wax, which makes candles
- ▶ SideRight, a manufacturer of housing siding
- ▶ PurFilter, which rents and services water coolers for home and office use
- ▶ Rod Collins' Workshop, a metalworking shop whose titular craftsman makes custom weather vanes

Few employees attend to these sleepy small businesses. The biggest, SideRight, employs six people. The various workers and proprietors of the industrial park are nice small-town folks who have been altered by the psychic radiation given off by the ODEs inhabiting the Waltz server array. The team won't interact with them all (maybe not any of them), so here is an assortment of names and quickie descriptions to assign as need be:

- ▶ Becky Young, chubby-checked bottle blonde in her mid-thirties
- ▶ Carol Haggerty, jittery brunette with nicotine-stained fingers
- ▶ Jared Lee, freckled ex-linebacker

- ▶ Phil Sinnott, balding, perspiring, middle-aged
- ▶ Candi Hunter, sharp-chinned brunette, in her late twenties, wears glasses
- ▶ Amberly Clark, frizzy haired, blue eyed
- ▶ Andy Fieldsted, slightly bucktoothed redhead, in his thirties (Rod Collins is a thin, laconic man with a perpetual squint.)

None have anything particularly useful to say. They haven't seen anything weird around here. If asked, they admit to feeling a touch unwell lately. Play them as just slightly off, their speech and wits slowed.

Forensic Anthropology: The first person the group talks to has tiny brown speckles on his or her top, not inconsistent with blood spatter.

If the team follows this person home, they find the interior of the house strewn with the partially dismembered body parts of his or her entire family (Stability Difficulty 4 vs. a loss of 4.) When confronted the perpetrator seems at first unaware that anything bad has happened. Under the pressure of **Interrogation**, the suspect snaps suddenly out of fugue state, realizes the horror of her crimes, and tries immediately to kill herself. After the team restrains the suspect, she says the "fuzzies" got in her head and somehow made her do it.

"You know. The fuzzies. They're fuzzy around the edges."

The arrestee can't explain it any better than that.

Depending on how much time you want to devote to this tangent, which serves only atmospheric purposes, the team might discover that one or two of the other industrial park denizens have annihilated their families as well, and then gone about their routines as if nothing had happened. With the rest, they find indications that they're planning to do it but haven't yet: a new gun purchase, poisoned pudding in the fridge, a propane tank being converted into a makeshift bomb out in the work shed, and so on. Players who seem determined to squeeze more information out of this sidelight element get further vague descriptions of the fuzzies:

- ▶ "You know, like them pictures and videos on Facebook."
- ▶ "They're like the things you see in dreams, except you can't exactly see them."
- ▶ "Like an old television from the '70s that's gone out of whack."
- ▶ "They blip in and out and get inside you."

Everyone abandons the place around supper time. It remains deserted until morning. Burglar alarms suffice to protect the lonely Waltz servers. But now they're guarded by glitches, Outer Dark Entities summoned by code the symp uploaded to the servers.

One glitch per player appears in the server building. As noted above, attempts to destroy the building from afar cause the glitches to appear where the characters are and attack them.

If the investigators have someone else push the detonator from afar, the glitches attack their surrogates and kill them before they can act, retreating to the server building.

Once the agents have killed the glitches, they can take the corrupted servers away to be safely dismantled by Ordo Veritatis technical specialists.

If they've already dealt with the contaminated cars, this ends the investigation and neutralization phases; the team can then describe its Veil-Out procedures.

Otherwise, it must still deal with the monster attacks.

For an additional note of victory, you might note that tech specialists find data on the corrupted server allowing other teams to identify and apprehend several Esoterror cells around the world. These cells were due to receive orders to perform murders for display to the imaging satellites.

HANDOUTS

GEOSLASHERS HANDOUT #1

Dated three months before the present.

WALTZ AGREES TO REMOVE MAPS PIC OF ALLEGED MURDER SCENE

TBZ News, Christy Paul

The search giant Waltz agreed yesterday to take down a satellite image that, according to a North Dakota woman, shows the body of her murdered sister. Madeline Ankers, 34, of Grand Forks noticed something when she zoomed in on the sewage treatment plant outside the city: a tableau featuring milling police officers and the slain body of her sister, Janis. The photo, posted by a friend of the family on Facebook, made social media rounds before Madeline could formally request the photo's takedown.

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GEOSLASHERS HANDOUT #2

Streetwartz camera car snaps prelude to murder

Lexington Star, Kendall Weekes

Local blogger Jesse Freeman got a big surprise when he used Waltz's mapping service to find a street-level view of an apartment building he was thinking of renting in — a split-second snapshot of a recent slaying.

StreetWaltz images are collected by a vehicle that snaps automated images. The driver does not monitor the photographs in real time. For privacy reasons the StreetWaltz service blurs out any faces captured in the images. But this is done by an automated computer process known as an algorithm, without human supervision.

The image Freeman found blurred the faces of two men — one unsuspectingly taking a newspaper from a sidewalk vending machine, the other coming up behind him with a pistol.

Checking the Lexington Star website, Freeman found our report on a shooting death at that spot two weeks ago, and alerted police. He also posted a capture of the shot to his blog.

Lexington police have been in contact with the Waltz mapping department and have interviewed the driver of the car. They confirmed that the picture was taken on the day of the killing but as of yet has yielded no useful leads regarding the murder of hardware store clerk Andre Hopkins, 57. "The company has turned over the unblurred image, but unfortunately the face in the image is still mostly obscured. The photo does confirm that the shooter, as per our previous description, wore a dark shell jacket, an East Kentucky Miners basketball jersey, and jeans."

Hopkins' wallet was missing when ambulance crews arrived and has not been found. Robbery remains a likely motive.

"It's a comment on our modern surveillance society," Freeman said, "but also a fluke. Because what were the odds a StreetWaltz car would be going past just seconds before one man pulled the trigger on another?"

Dated two and a half months before the present.

STREETWALTZ CAMERA CAR SNAPS PRELUDE TO MURDER

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NEW CRYSTAL MAIDEN

ANOTHER OF THE FOLDERS FREEZE-FRAMED ON THE SEX CLUB VIDEO footage leads the team to a location in Belize, near its Actun Tunichil Muknal caves. Archaeology buffs know them for their evidence of Mayan human sacrifice, including a crystallized skeleton. Spelunkers have just recently found a new, even larger underground complex nearby. Enterprising reality TV show producers prepare to underwrite an expedition, which they hope to cut into a show in the dangerous jobs genre. If the Outer Dark has taken an interest in the area, investigators must assume that they intend for their cameras to capture something truly horrible in bright green nightvision.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

Like Actun Tunichil Muknal, this new unnamed cavern complex was visited by the Mayans hundreds of years ago. There they sacrificed outcasts and captives to the predatory ODEs, called cavelings, dwelling in its depths. Since the fall of the Mayan Empire, the caverns have been forgotten. The cavelings have drifted back to the other side of the membrane.

The symp instigating this action occupies the body of Oscar Chang. His simple job: to reawaken the cavelings in time to make their television debuts on reality show cameras. Having accomplished this, he hangs back waiting to initiate any necessary countermeasures. To help him in both tasks he has hired a gang of cheap thugs who usually specialize in carjacking tourists.

Meanwhile, the cavelings, awake and hungry, await a fresh crop of unwitting sacrifices.

TRAIL OF CLUES

Preliminary Research shows what the group knows about Belize and the Mayan crystal skeleton. On **Arrival in Belize**, they get their bearings and soak in the agreeable local atmosphere. If they get wind of **The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow** they learn of the unfortunate victim **Oscar Chang** used to awaken the cavelings. Contacting the **TV Crew** gives the group the chance to talk their way into the caves under the pretext of taking part in the show.

Then they go **Down in the Hole**, encountering Makeva Barrow as a **Crystal Skeleton**. A shattered Mayan **Stele** conveys an implication of just how wise it wouldn't be to try to wipe out all the cavelings. Deeper in the caves, the **Olm Pool** provides a hint about caveling predation habits. A **Cave Painting**, in possibly cryptic sequential art, warns them against multiplying the number of cavelings they face. And a **Hornet Chamber** points to the way out.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

Oscar Chang or his chief bullyboy, **Itamar Cruz**, may strike against the investigators if they intrude too far into their business topside. This may include a blind date with a specimen of Belize's **Toxic Fauna**.

Once they go into the subterranean complex the investigators look on in helpless horror as a **Cave-In** traps them down there. This leaves them open to a series of **Caveling Attacks**.

SCENES

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

SCENE TYPE: Alternate Intro

LEAD-OUT: Arrival in Belize

(core) **Archaeology:** The crystallized skeleton shown in the image from folder three is quite famous. It comes from Belize's Actun Tunichil Muknal caves. The skeleton, known as the Crystal Maiden, belongs to a teenage girl who died in Mayan times, most likely as a sacrifice. Calcium-rich water droplets fell onto the skeleton and over a period of many years covered it in eerily beautiful crystals. This same process creates stalagmites, stalactites, and a wide assortment of weird cave formations, collectively called speleothems.

The players doubtless want to know more about the caves. Supply the following answers on behalf of the character(s) with **Archaeology** in response to specific questions.

- ▶ The caves are located deep in the rainforests of Belize, in its Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve.
- ▶ Locals refer to them as Xibalba; archaeologists use the somewhat unfortunate acronym ATM.
- ▶ The nearest settlement is Belize's capital city, Belmopan.
- ▶ To prepare the site as an altar for human sacrifice, the Mayans decorated it, carving its rock formations and leaving behind ceramics.
- ▶ Though not open to the public on a regular basis, licensed groups can lead occasional tours into it.
- ▶ The country's National Institute of Culture and History, which oversees the site, recently had to clamp down on visits after a tourist dropped a heavy camera on a thousand-year-old skull, crushing it.
- ▶ A new cave complex was recently discovered a few miles to the north of Actun Tunichil Muknal. As yet unexplored, it has been given the provisional name Actun X. ("Actun" is Mayan for "cave.")
- ▶ Controversy swirls around Actun X because Belizean officials have granted exploration rights to an American television production company. Academic archaeologists are circulating a protest petition. (**Bureaucracy:** Sounds like the professor types in the NICH got overruled by the tourism promoters higher up in government.)

Occult Studies: Human sacrifice held an integral role in the culture not only of the Mayans but many other Central American civilizations. It horrifies us now; when events cause interest in it to leak from the staid halls of academia into popular culture, membrane thinning can result.

Players asking what they know ahead of time about Belize garner the following.

History: A former part of the British Empire, Belize is the only Central American country with English as an official language.

Languages: People in this mixing bowl of a nation also speak Spanish and a creole, spelled Kriol.

Forensic Accounting: Its chief industry is tourism, with its natural vistas the key attraction. Belize bills itself as a pioneer of ecotourism. It welcomes American retirees, whose presence bolsters the service industry.

Natural History: Belize's panoply of toxic wildlife encompasses both the black widow and brown recluse spider, eight snakes ranging from the fer-de-lance to the eyelash pit viper, and the dart frog. Crocodiles patrol the rivers, snagging the occasional swimmer.

Wade out into the ocean to risk brushes with such hazardous marine life as the scorpion fish, Portuguese man-of-war, and stingray.

Occult: Belief in psychics and occult evil reverberates strongly here. In 2010, a psychic in the southern district of Toledo blamed the disappearances of two children on the American operators of a crocodile sanctuary. Villagers burned the sanctuary, forcing the proprietors to flee.

Alternately, the investigators can start reeling off what they already know about the Crystal Maiden and Belize on their arrival there.

ARRIVAL IN BELIZE

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-IN: Preliminary Research

LEAD-OUTS: The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, TV Crew

Knowing they're heading to Belize's capital, some investigators may be surprised when they get to Belmopan and see how small it is. Fewer than fourteen thousand people live there. It is a place of wide boulevards and open green spaces, whose buildings, often colorfully painted, see no reason to exceed two stories. With its low density and combination of tourist destination and university town, a calm, laidback atmosphere prevails.

Architecture: The oldest buildings here date back to the late sixties.

History: Belmopan was a planned city, built to replace Belize City as the nation's capital. Hurricane Hattie flattened Belize City, a low-lying coastal settlement, in 1961.

Trivia: It is the country's center for educational institutions as well as its seat of government.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MAKEVA BARROW

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Arrival in Belize, Oscar Chang, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

LEAD-OUTS: Oscar Chang, Down in the Hole, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

Perhaps inspired by the pipe clue found at the Powell house (p. 10), with its talk of Mayan sacrifices to cave creatures, the team may decide to ask around to see if anyone has recently gone missing.

In fact, a young woman named Makeva Barrow, who worked at the hotel as a maid until her meth problem got her fired, has vanished. No one has bothered to report it to the authorities, but her fellow meth-head boyfriend, an Australian expat named Greg Quirk, has been asking after her in the area's crummiest cantinas. Belmopan doesn't have much of a low life, so all of the criminals and skeeves know each other. A few hours trawling tawdry places with **Streetwise** turns up her name. Her disappearance occurred a couple of days after Oscar Chang's arrival. (You may need to compress that chronology a bit if the players have chosen this as their first investigation arising from the folder freeze-frames.)

Like any tweaker, Greg fears contact with anyone vaguely official. **Streetwise** puts him at his ease. **Intimidation** or **Interrogation** turns him into a more obviously reluctant witness.

He can't imagine who would want to hurt his lovely Makeva. He did, however, owe money to a local dealer and all-around criminal, Evan Pandey.

(core) Pandey, a hardened character who curls his fingers as if wielding an unseen machete, can be opened up with **Intimidation** or **Flirting**. Under a plausible line of questioning, he admits that someone came around asking for suggestions of a person who wouldn't be missed if they went away. He suggested Greg, who is never going to pay him that money back. Maybe Greg wasn't in, and that person found Makeva instead. On a 2-point spend of either ability, he names Itamar Cruz as the man he pointed in Quirk's direction.

OSCAR CHANG

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Arrival in Belize, The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

LEAD-OUTS: Down in the Hole, The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

A Venezuelan mathematician born to a Chinese immigrant family, Oscar Chang crosses cultures with ease, exchanging both academic ideas and fluids. Now the symp borrowing his body uses the remaining semblance of his personality to set horrors in motion and defend against investigators as needed.

Before the team arrived he found and hired a group of local toughs, led by surly machete wielder Itamar Cruz. His roster of underlings reflects the country's mixed Anglo-Spanish composition. Names if you need them are: Woodrow Jimenez, Dalton McCaulay, Cristobal Trapp, and Luis Torres.

On a Difficulty 6 **Surveillance** test, the team runs across Oscar on the outskirts of town, in a ramshackle residential district. If approached, he denies ever being in San Francisco. He hotly denies suggestions that he might be a swinger, which comes across as absolutely honest to Bullshit Detector because symp hosts don't betray human signals of deception.

He claims to be in Belize as an interested ecotourist. Both archaeology and television production intrigue him, which is why he's hanging around here instead of going off on his planned snorkeling expedition to explore coral reefs.

If asked about the disappearance of Makeva Barrow, he feigns ignorance.

When his conversation with agents grows tense, Cruz and the others swagger up to extricate him. Should they ask him about his odd choice of buddies, Chang gives them a faint and humorless smile and heads away with the enforcers.

At this point, the investigators might decide to:

- ▶ do away with Chang and his buddies
- ▶ grab him for interrogation and a possible cure
- ▶ leave him alone for the moment

Law: Ordo Veritatis protocols allow agents to apply extreme prejudice to Chang and company, who they have good reason to believe are up to their waists in Esoterror. They do have to do this neatly and discreetly, avoiding the attention of local authorities, or distressing discoveries that might spread membrane-thinning social anxiety.

Should they take Chang alive, they might **Interrogate** him. He explains that his job here has already been done, and that their only chance of stopping what he's set in motion lies in the cave complex. (The symp tells them this assuming that the cavelings will get them.) On a 1-point spend, he admits to ordering Cruz to kidnap Makeva Barrow, and he took her down into the caves as "food for his friends."

Attempting to expel the symp from his system works as per the description on p. 17. Like other symp victims, he emerges traumatized and brain-damaged, and with only fuzzy memories of what he did under the being's influence. He does tearfully recall carrying a sedated Makeva Barrow into the caves, where "lurking beings who were rock one minute, pure darkness the next, claws and jaws the next" tore her to shreds before his eyes. He remembers laughing giddily, unafraid of the cave monsters.

ITAMAR CRUZ

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

LEAD-OUTS: Oscar Chang, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew, Down in the Hole

Braced independently of Oscar Chang, Itamar extravagantly swears that he's never so much as heard of Evan Pandey, Greg Quirk, or Makeva Barrow. **Bullshit Detector** says otherwise.

So does Greg's nosy neighbor, Shirley Bolon, who after **Negotiation** and a wad of greenbacks asserts that she saw Itamar Cruz prowling around their shack an hour after she saw Makeva alive for the last time. For another hundred bucks, Shirley offers to give them a psychic reading. Should they pay up, she throws her head back and shows only the whites of her eyes. She shakes and groans, then faints dead at the investigators' feet. Brought back to consciousness, she whispers: "In the dark. She died alone in the dark. And so will all of you."

TOXIC FAUNA

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, Itamar Cruz, TV Crew

LEAD-OUTS: The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, Itamar Cruz, TV Crew, Down in the Hole

Need a hint of creepy menace as the investigators methodically poke for clues above the surface, away from this scenario's featured ODEs? Itamar or one of his thugs could drop any of the aforementioned poisonous wildlife species into a car seat, hotel bed, or other unexpected spot.

Avoiding a bite requires a Difficulty 6 **Athletics** test. The character falls into an unconscious or quasi-conscious state, loses 6 Health immediately, and must then make a Difficulty 4 **Health** test to avoid losing another die of Health.

Quick hospitalization, or a Difficulty 6 **Medic** test, keeps the character alive. After a day, the bite victim regains half the Health points lost to the venom.

TV CREW

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Arrival in Belize, The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna

LEAD-OUTS: Down in the Hole, The Disappearance of Makeva Barrow, Oscar Chang, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna

A crew from the US-based production company Altimeter readies itself to shoot the first season of its new reality show, *Cave Divers*.

Trivia: Altimeter produces shows about people working difficult jobs in visually arresting environments, including

Arctic Choppers, about helicopter pilots in Alaska, and *Red Claws*, featuring lobster fishermen off the coast of Maine. Though formulaic and obviously partially staged, their shows occupy the classier end of the reality TV spectrum.

Key personnel are:

- ▶ Creator and producer Diana Russell, a redhead in her early forties with a perpetually furrowed brow. She believes in the quality of her shows and bristles when anyone slams reality television.
- ▶ Curly-headed, long-bearded camera operator Duff Bell. He'll be going down into the cave to film the spelunkers' adventures. This manly granola dude shows equal comfort bragging about his past dangerous exploits or discoursing on New Age philosophy.
- ▶ Diminutive, determined sound technician Charlotte McCormack. She wants to be respected for the quality of her work and is about this close to clocking Duff, who spends much of his time either condescending to her or coming on to her. She too will be joining the spelunkers and takes pride in her recent crash course in cave training.
- ▶ Erica Alvarado, Brooklyn-born assistant director of Belize's National Institute of Culture and History. As government liaison to Altimeter, she's been instructed to protect any historic treasures found in the cave while also turning the show into a tourism promotion opportunity.

TV shows don't get made by teams this small. Feel free to mention that other crew members are milling around performing tasks in the background as the investigators meet them.

Forensic Accounting: The trade papers say that Altimeter faces a cash crunch after the Swedish co-producer that helps finance several of its other shows went into bankruptcy protection.

Unlike other Altimeter shows, this one follows the reality show formula of putting a disparate group of strangers together in a high-pressure situation. No one gets voted out of the cave, but it is meant to generate conflict within a volatile cast of characters. The real spelunkers they've cast to exaggerate their real responses are:

- ▶ Delia Adkins, the spitfire. Young, hot, blonde, and argumentative. Willing to seem flirtatious when the cameras are rolling.
- ▶ Jake Lawson, the crusty veteran. Gets his back up when someone questions his authority.
- ▶ Jeffrey Nguyen, cocky young hotshot.
- ▶ Marianne Willis, inspirational figure. The show marks her return to spelunking after a bout with breast cancer.
- ▶ Zayne Lawson, prodigal son. Jake's boy, now in his twenties, grew up with his mom, resents everything about his dad, including the spelunking hobby. The producers want a story arc about him and Jake trying to reconnect. Hunky Zayne hopes the show will land him an acting career in TV and movies.

CAVELINGS

With wonder I beheld the cave paintings. Here I beheld a message of impossible age, a signal of common humanity across an unimaginable chasm of time.

Then in the dark, I heard a scurry. I looked around, and saw nothing. Yet the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I knew I was in the presence of something else. Something far older. And deadlier. A primal intelligence that hunted us long before we were human.

— from the unpublished field notes of Benjamin Frost, adjunct professor of anthropology, Penn State University, Sergeac Expedition, 07-12-1954

Cavelings were perhaps the first Outer Dark Entities to encounter mankind. Evidence suggests that they predate *Homo sapiens* and crossed the membrane to torment our hominid predecessors. They personify our purest fears — of the dark, of predation in the dark.

Depending on whether they seek to camouflage themselves, move, or attack, they shift between three forms: stone, darkness, and animalistic.

They can reshape themselves to resemble rock formations clinging to the surrounding cavern wall nearly indistinguishably. They wait until victims stand within mere inches of them. Then their luminescent green eyes snap open, revealing themselves when already within reach of their prey.

They can also turn the outer surfaces of their misshapen humanoid forms inky black, merging completely with the surrounding darkness. Cavellings enter this mode to rush from place to place. In this form they can vertically scale any rock surface, exercising spider-like speed and agility.

Finally, when illuminated by any light source, they appear as rolling masses of claws, fur, muscle, and un-pigmented, scaly skin, topped by a narrow head with radiant green eyes.

More instinctive than intelligent, they hiss and shriek but never talk. Like many Outer Dark Entities, they seek to inflict maximum emotional damage before finally physically killing their victims. They use human terror to breed more cavelings. Whenever an investigator loses 3 or more Stability points in a single go, an additional cavelling pops into being. Though not tracked with Stability pools, GMC fear can also trigger cavelling spawnings. (The scenario notes point at when this might happen.)

Cavelling hunting patterns rely on enclosed spaces and seem to toy with their victims. Keyed to generate as many new creatures as possible, they strike, inflict distressing damage, and then retreat again. This yields more offspring than a single quick kill.

Although incapable of abstract thought, they exhibit insidious cleverness in obstructing exits or herding victims deeper into cave complexes.

When a set of caverns loses its terrifying position in the imaginations of the people who live near it, cavelings struggle to remain in our world. When a complex becomes a safe, well-lit, and accessible tourist attraction, its cavelings dissipate back across the membrane. When people simply leave without fully domesticating a cave complex, its ODEs instead go dormant, ready to be called back with a revivifying sacrifice.

The Mayans were not the only culture to encounter the cavelings. Many cultures retain mythic memories of this subterranean apex predator.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 8, Scuffling 12

HIT THRESHOLD: 4 (hard to see)

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: +3 (claws)

ARMOR: none



Law: Both Zayne and Delia have minor criminal convictions (for drug possession and assault respectively) they did not disclose to Belizean border officials. This could justify the pulling of their work permits.

If the investigators moot the possibility of sneaking into Actun X by themselves, a character with **Occult Studies** remembers that the Esoterrorists MO seeks attention. If they're planning something awful, it will happen when the cameras are rolling.

To get to the figurative and literal bottom of this, the team has to attach itself to the Altimeter crew. Any plausible way they set out to do this eventually works. What seems plausible depends on character backgrounds. Example approaches include:

Negotiation: An offer to replace lost production funding they were hoping to get from their Swedish co-producers. (See above.)

Bureaucracy: Causing trouble through the Belizean government, then promising to resolve it. For example, they could make immigration trouble for Zayne and Delia (see the "Law" entry above). Alternately, they might have the government directly insist on their involvement.

Flirting: A character might display the sex appeal needed to be chosen as a late addition to the cast.

Intimidation: Without giving away too much, but perhaps mentioning the disappearance of Makeva Barrow, scare cast members off so that they need to be replaced.

Pathology + Infiltration: One or more cast members might be dosed with a substance mimicking the effects of food poisoning, requiring their replacement.

DOWN IN THE HOLE

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Oscar Chang, Itamar Cruz, Toxic Fauna, TV Crew

LEAD-OUTS: Crystal Skeleton, Stele

This is a horror cave complex, not a fantasy game underground environment. Instead of a series of rooms to explore, each of which presents the group with a separate situation, it acts as a dark, enclosed, dangerous space where they confront predatory forces.

Scattered through the physical space are a number of clues that assist the team as they try to survive in it, and a final clue enabling their escape. Unlike a typical GUMSHOE investigation, it's not the clues that lead the investigators from one scene to another. Instead their movement from one section of the complex to another allows them to collect the clues. One of the clues is not keyed to a specific location, but to the aftermath of an event. Because the players will want to experience them, we've labeled these as core clues, even though they somewhat bend the usual definition.

CRYSTAL SKELETON

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Down in the Hole, Cave-In, Stele, Caveling Attacks

LEAD-OUTS: Cave-In, Stele, Caveling Attacks

At the quickest of first glances it appears that the center of this chamber contains another ancient crystallized skeleton.

Forensic Anthropology: Actually, this skeleton is fresh.

It lies in a bed of crystals, some of them dislodged by recent activity and covering the bones. Hence the initial false impression.

Forensic Anthropology: The skeleton has suffered extensive damage, as if mauled by predators.

Natural History: The attack pattern matches no known animal.

(pipe clue for "Swallowed") **Evidence Collection:** In a hard to spot location behind a crystal outcrop, the investigator finds a smashed blood sample vial. Blood residue remains inside it.

For implications of this clue that can be followed up later, see sidebar.

STELE

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Down in the Hole, Crystal Skeleton, Cave-In, Caveling Attacks

LEAD-OUTS: Cave-In, Crystal Skeleton, Caveling Attacks

Propped up against the cavern wall is the top third of an otherwise shattered Maya stele.

Archaeology: These statues, prevalent during the classic Maya period, which ended around 900 CE, dot Central America. Though early examples depict mythological scenes, most celebrate the accomplishments of kings. This one, carved in low relief, fits the latter pattern. The statue portion remains

BLOOD VIAL FOLLOW-UP

Upon return to the surface, investigators can match this blood with DNA from hair samples of Makeva Barrow.

Forensic Anthropology: The blood sample is high in cortisol, suggesting that it was taken from her in a moment of utmost stress.

Fingerprinting: A partial print from Oscar Chang can be found on the vial. (This assumes that they have access to Chang's fingerprint.)

Belmopan has few enough post offices that they can be canvassed by a small team over a period of a few days. If they do, they discover that a man matching Oscar's description shipped a small cooler to an address in Nonthaburi, Thailand.

Attempts by a Thai Ordo team to track down the package at the other end fail. However, this does hint that groups of Esoterrorists are coordinating to gather blood from people victimized by Outer Dark Entities.



in pristine condition, except for the face. It has been incised away by a primitive chisel or similar implement.

Natural History: That's no chisel, those are claw marks! Not from any known animal, but claw marks all the same.

The non-figurative parts of the stele have been smashed.

Archaeology: The smashed bits contain Mayan hieroglyphics. They're sufficiently intact to assemble them like a 3-D puzzle.

That's a laborious process, taking enough time for the cavelings to attack twice (see below).

When assembled, **Languages (Classical Mayan)** or a 1-point **Archaeology** spend provides the following translation. Highly provisional, you understand.

All celebrate and bow down before the power of King K'inich Kan B'alam, the snake jaguar. He has claimed as his birthright all the fertile lands and the places of great wealth. All the former enemies who surround us have bowed their heads to him. Their hearts feed the gods and keep the sky moving.

Now King K'inich Kan B'alam the snake jaguar declares that he will expand his territory in the only directions possible. Two realms yet escape his conquest. One, the realm underground, the place of darkness, where the tadpoles of dragons dwell. Two, the realm beyond the realm, the place of madness and demons. In this foul place those realms intertwine. And so here with the placement of this monument, the conquest of both shall begin.

History: Two Mayan kings in Palenque were named K'inich Kan B'alam, the snake jaguar. This sounds like the second of them, who ruled from 684 to 702. He presided over an era of prosperity and infrastructure building.

Archaeology: From the wear pattern on the fragments, this monument was broken in ancient times.

CAVE-IN

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Crystal Skeleton, Stele, Caveling Attacks

LEAD-OUTS: Crystal Skeleton, Stele, Caveling Attacks

After the team moves into the cave network and plays out one scene, the hole they came down through collapses in on itself.

If Oscar Chang or any of his underlings remain at large, one of them triggers this by throwing down a stick of dynamite.

Otherwise you can attribute it to the cavelings, who know a weak spot in the cliff and have the uncanny strength to jar it just so. Their preternatural agility allows them to bound out of the way before the rocks fall on them.

You might have one of the supporting players injured in the cave-in, making them a burden to others. Camera operator Duff Bell makes a likely candidate. He might separate himself from the group while shooting some B-roll of the cavern opening from below. Or choose the member of the supporting cast the players seem to care about most.

As soon as a player says, "So we're trapped," or the equivalent, all make Difficulty 4 Stability tests, to stave off a loss of 4. Add 2 to both Difficulty and potential loss for a character who has demonstrated claustrophobia or achluophobia (fear of the dark.)

In the unlikely event that a player contrives to be under the hole when it caves in, the character takes 1 instance of +3 damage on a Difficulty 4 **Athletics** test, 2 instances on a failure.

CAVELING ATTACKS

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Crystal Skeleton, Stele, Cave-In, Olm Pool, Cave Painting

LEAD-OUTS: Crystal Skeleton, Stele, Olm Pool, Cave Painting, Hornet Chamber

The first caveling attack occurs after the cave-in, as soon as you feel the session needs a jeopardy injection. This might happen after the players have emotionally recovered from the cave-in and have started to investigate something else, most likely in the “Crystal Skeleton” or “Stele” scenes. Judge whether you’ll scare the group most by staging the attack before or after they have gathered the information in those scenes.

What exactly happens during each attack depends on the size of the supporting cast. When an investigator strikes up a vivid relationship, either negative or positive, with any of the supporting characters, emphasize them, ignoring any advice to the contrary below. So, for example, if a player makes Zelia important by interacting with her a great deal, make sure she takes a central part in the attack scenes and/or their aftermaths. You probably want to make the first kill a character no one has engaged with much, saving the others to be hurt or killed deeper into the storyline. On the other hand, you might need to grab attention by staging the most shocking possible demise first.

The cavelings intend their first attack as an appetizer of terror. At first, there are three of them. They scuttle along the walls overhead, then down to slash at a story-appropriate victim or victims. Attacks occur no matter how narrow the passageways separating them from the humans. Cavelings can skitter up the high walls over the party, overrunning them from above.

Describe wounds to supporting characters in as unnerving a manner as possible. A cast member doesn’t just get hit in the leg; she suffers a severed artery or has her Achilles tendon torn out.

Nightvision equipment doesn’t easily pick out cavelings in their camouflaged, stone-like forms. The explorers can hear their scuttling but can’t really see them. Only by using a light source can they distinguish them from the surrounding walls. Exposure to light switches the entities to their predatory forms and also lets them increase their numbers for later attacks.

For each separate scene in which they make an attack, a caveling exposed to a light source and not immediately killed returns the next time as two cavelings.

Between attacks, the civilians freak out, making stupid, fear-driven choices. The investigators must ride herd on them as they lose it.

1 point of **Reassurance** or **Intimidation** can calm down one supporting character until the next attack occurs. Intimidation never works twice on the same character.

Because team members are trapped in a hostile environment with no clear means of exit, creature attacks incur possible Stability losses each time they repeat.

In fact, these escalate with each new event. The first attack carries a potential loss of 4 points and a Difficulty of 4. Add 1 to both potential loss and Difficulty for each subsequent attack.

As per usual, don’t track Stability for supporting characters. They go crazier faster than the main heroes, purely as a matter of your dramatic description.

Try to space at least ten to fifteen minutes of session time between each attack. If the players are proactive, these will consist of scenes devoted to cavern exploration and clue-finding. If they go into turtle mode, the supporting characters generate problems forcing them to act.

If the PCs do not provoke character interactions spontaneously, here are some ideas to draw inspiration from. Use only as many as you actually need. Don’t feel that you have to wring the juice out of all of these in order to feel you’ve completed the scenario properly.

- ▶ Camera operator Duff Russell breaks his leg in the cave-in, or a subsequent fall. Or he has his kneecap ripped off by a caveling. Afterwards he spends all of his time telling the heroes how he would be solving the problem, if only he weren’t disabled.
- ▶ Sound technician Charlotte McCormack takes a foolish risk to prove her toughness under pressure.
- ▶ Team archaeologist Erica Alvarado throws a wobbly and starts smashing Mayan artifacts, scolding herself for wasting her life studying a culture of savagery and death.
- ▶ Delia Adkins tells everyone they’re doing it wrong. Or a couple of the macho men, with zero encouragement from her, butt heads trying to establish themselves as her protectors.
- ▶ Hotshot Jeffrey Nguyen expresses complete confidence in himself just before he ventures ahead and gets dragged off. Or falls backwards, decapitated. Later the cavelings bowl his head at the others.
- ▶ Veteran caver Jake Lawson tries to appoint himself head of the team now that emergency conditions apply.
- ▶ His son decides this is the moment to air all of his filial grievances.
- ▶ A beatific smile crosses the face of cancer survivor Marianne Willis, who reveals that her disease has come back and that she was hoping to die here. As horrible as this may be, she says it beats a hospital bed.

Caveling attacks continue until a TPK results, or the survivors get out of the cave network; see “Hornet Chamber.”

OLM POOL

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: second (or later) Caveling Attacks, Cave Painting

LEAD-OUTS: third (or later) Caveling Attacks, Cave Painting, Hornet Chamber

Aside from its outer edges, which may be precariously skirted to pass through into the next chamber, this cavern is taken up by a subterranean pool. In it swim huge numbers of olms, white aquatic amphibians that eerily retain larval features as adults.

Natural History: This is a new olm species, and the first found in the New World.

Occult Studies: Also known as the proteus, this animal was once believed to be the juvenile form of dragons.

Natural History: These animals eat snails and insects. They can radically slow their metabolisms to survive for long periods without food. The profusion in which they appear here suggests that nothing is preying on them.

From this a player might surmise that the cavelings are indifferent to these creatures as a potential food source, because they don't experience fear.

CAVE PAINTING

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: second (or later) Caveling Attacks, Olm Pool

LEAD-OUTS: third (or later) Caveling Attacks, Olm Pool, Hornet Chamber

Nightvision equipment picks up a faint glimmer of something painted onto a rare stretch of relatively smooth cavern wall. A light source must be used to see the images clearly.

The painting consists of several rows of figures.

Archaeology: Mayan codices often use sequential art, telling stories in a sequence of pictures, as later found in comic books.

The first row depicts two men in Mayan headgear approaching what looks to be a hole in the ground.

The next shows them facing a figure of inhuman proportions, seemingly made of stone.

In row three, the first of the Mayan figures holds aloft a torch. Instead of the stone figure, they face a monstrous being of claws and teeth.

Row four depicts the two Mayan figures facing two of the stone creatures.

In row five the two figures lie dead and bleeding, with neither monster type anywhere to be seen.

The final row shows two men in distinctly different Mayan headgear wearing blindfolds. They present a bound and supine captive to the stone figure.

The torch appears only in the third row. Note this only if asked to confirm it.

Astute players will decode the sequential narrative as follows:

- 1 Mayan warriors enter the cave.
- 2 They encounter one caveling in its stony form.
- 3 They expose it to torchlight, revealing its eating form.
- 4 Having exposed it to light they have spawned another caveling.
- 5 The cavelings have killed the Mayan warriors.
- 6 Having given up on fighting them, the Mayans now propitiate them with a captive sacrifice.

(core) The key takeaway: exposing cavelings to light makes more cavelings.

Chemistry: The images are drawn in a pigment made of soot and blood. Though it's impossible to date them outside of a laboratory environment, they do look very old.

Archaeology: These depictions show less sophistication than you'd expect from a Mayan codex. These images were made under emergency conditions, by people making do with what they had.

Forensic Anthropology: Stuck in the crystalline surface of the cavern floor are shards of bone. These show signs of snapping, gnawing, and chewing.

Archaeology: From the degree of crystal deposition, these are probably between seven to eight centuries old. Older, though not by much, than the original Crystal Maiden at Actun Tunichil Muknal. Are these the remains of the people who made this painting?

HORNET CHAMBER

SCENE TYPE: Conclusion

LEAD-INS: second (or later) Caveling Attacks, Olm Pool, Cave Painting

LEAD-OUT: third (or later) Caveling Attacks, Veil-Out

A swarm of hornets crawls across folds in the rock here, building a nest.

(core) **Natural History** or **Forensic Entomology:** Hornets will only nest so far from their sources of food. There must be an exit to the surface nearby.

Moving further into the chamber, the group sees a glimmer of light overhead. A Difficulty 4 **Athletics** test gets a character up to the fissure. From there the investigator can call to the outside world for help. If the Oscar Chang symp has not yet been dealt with, he, Itamar Cruz, and his goons have this one known remaining exit staked out. (Or maybe they took out Itamar and not Oscar, in which case Oscar has a new crew of hired thugs with him.)

Itamar pours acid down into the hole onto the climbing investigator. This does damage +3.

How the team neutralizes them and succeeds in attracting rescuer attention is left as an exercise in player ingenuity. Maybe after all the suffering they don't get out after all, and die in the dark. This game is not, you will note, entitled *The Esotriendliness*.

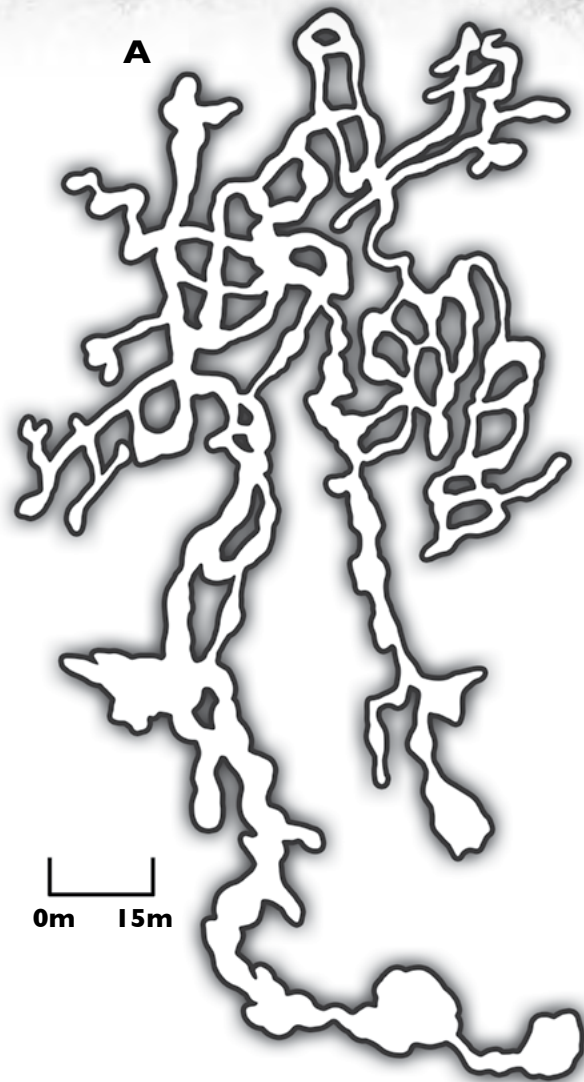
If they have already removed the symp from the equation, a distant news crew hears their shouts. A frenzy ensues as camera crew and onlookers rush over to see what's up. In time jackhammers are able to open the fissure wide enough to allow the team and any other survivors to escape. This occasions the same kind of worldwide coverage seen in the Chilean miners case of 2010. Naturally when it submits to interviews, the team will want to shade their miraculous survival as part of the Veil-Out.

Alternately the team may want to attempt to get out unassisted. This too we leave up to clever player scheming, probably involving a Preparedness roll or three.

VEIL-OUT

From the boasts made on the stele and how well they worked out, investigators may deduce that attempting to invade and conquer the cave world is a mug's game. All they have to do to satisfy the Ordo is to conclusively seal it off from the surface and make sure that it never becomes a locus of fear or cognitive dissonance. A quickly described application of dynamite and cement ought to do the trick.

Some leaning on Belize's NICH may be required to accomplish this. A 1-point **Bureaucracy** spend or the testimony of a terrified Erica Alvarado (should she still be alive) accomplishes this handily.





HEART OF OUTER DARKNESS

FROM A HUB OF FORMER SOVIET BLACK-MARKET ACTIVITY AND ARMS dealing to Ebola-infested Liberia, and then on to a Nigerian province overrun by the hyper-violent Boko Haram insurgency-slash-cult, the agents chase a plot to take two sources of global fear and multiply them together.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

Outer Dark Entities look with favor on Nigeria's Boko Haram movement, which combines the hallmarks of African insurgency, Islamic extremism, and magical cult into a toxic stew of mass-homicidal craziness. Its past depredations have gone viral and caused widespread distress. Now one of the symps seeks to maximize its ability to spread global cognitive dissonance by arming it with weaponized Ebola. That mission requires a stop-off in the disputed post-Soviet quasi-state of Transnistria, before heading to Monrovia, Liberia, then on to the Liberian hot zone of Voinjama, and finally to the Nigerian state of Yobe. There a Mystery Man has been cultivating a covert Esoterror wing of Boko Haram.

TRAIL OF CLUES

The team follows SympFour to **Moldova**, then on to **Transnistria**. Once there they may try to pick up her trail at the **Hotel Bolot**, or follow the pumping sounds of Russian techno to a club called the **Wolf's Den**. There they gain access to Yuri Enteo and his **Arms Emporium**, leading them to the Liberian capital of **Monrovia** and from there to the devastated, Ebola-ridden town of **Voinjama**. In **Clermont's Lab**, they discover that a corrupted aid worker has been shipping weaponized samples of the virus to be inserted into special grenades sold to the conspiracy by Enteo. This takes them to **Gwoza**, Nigeria, hotspot of Boko Haram activity. There they might meet supposed American aid worker **Ellis Sherman**, uncover a plot to add a **Dirty Bomb** to the mix, and finally encounter **The Colonel**, the reality-bending ODE mastermind behind the operation.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

In Transnistria, **Blight Wolves** might attack a party otherwise lacking in supernatural adversaries. Once in Africa similarly blighted animals might charge out of the jungle at them. In Gwoza they have to worry about an **Insurgent Attack**.



SCENES

MOLDOVA

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-OUT: Transnistria

Folder four contained a business card for a car service located in Chisinau, Moldova, and a black vape pen with a logo and some writing on it.

(pipe clue for “Transnistria”) **Data Retrieval:** Magnified, the pen can be seen to contain a wolf’s head logo, and the words **ВОЛК ДЕН**.

Languages (Russian): This translates as “Wolf’s Den.”

History: Moldova emerged as an autonomous republic after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union.

- ▶ Located between Ukraine and Russia, it has a ringside seat for the tensions and shifting borders characterizing the relationship of those much larger neighboring powers.
- ▶ Two thirds of it is culturally and linguistically Romanian.
- ▶ The other third, the unrecognized breakaway state of Transnistria (aka Trans-Dniester or Dniester), is inhabited mostly by Russian speakers. Locals call the place Pridnestrovie.
- ▶ Moldova’s total population is about 3.5 million.

Research: Its capital, Chisinau, is a commercial and administrative center of nearly seven hundred thousand. Transnistria lacks an airport, so, if that’s the ultimate destination, the team will have to come through here.

Chisinau’s modest, low-slung air terminal boasts a modern interior and is far from the most frightening in Eastern Europe.

If the group wants a local translator, he’s waiting for them at baggage claim. Ion Branescu, a ruffled man with an enlarged nose and extravagant sideburns, looks about sixty years old.

Forensic Anthropology: He’s fifteen years younger than his appearance suggests. And he’s drunk, though holding it well.

Confronted about his state of inebriation, Ion assures them that he is “utterly functional alcoholic.” Pressed further, he leans close to his interrogator and says, “If you have seen what they have made me to see, you would be drunk off ass, too.”

Fluent in both Romanian (which he calls “Moldovan”) and Russian, Ion worked as a propagandist before 1990 and then switched to journalism. He does his best to paint his homeland as a place of horrors naïve Westerners just aren’t prepared for, with dialogue like:

“You think membrane is thin in your Walmart McDonald’s world? Brothers, membrane here is so thin, you expect to see blood corpses staggering down the Stefan cel Mare.”

The players will probably assume that, when rubber hits road, he’s either going to get them in trouble, or die horribly himself. Decide whether they’ll find it more gratifying to see their genre assumptions met or defied. Ion might turn out to

RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES

As of this writing in July of 2014, the horror of Boko Haram has not yet crested. If you’re running this after the organization has been defeated — a consummation devoutly to be wished for — adapt the scenario by fictionalizing the details or finding another appalling African insurgency as its basis. Or set your campaign in the recent past. This last option gives you the chance to portray the team members as putting in motion the events that lead to the movement’s undoing.

be a hardened survivor who emerges bloodied from smoking wreckage to pull a fifth of vodka from his smoldering pocket and ask the team for a light.

The car service card lists no address, just a phone number.

Forensic Accounting: It’s a mobile number, indicating that this is probably a one-operator service. Oh, and Moldovan taxi drivers don’t give change.

If they call the number, a battered minibus, painted a bright pink and in bad need of washing, drives up. It already has passengers, a palpably annoyed older couple who look like locals.

Forensic Accounting: (or Ion explaining) Minibuses don’t follow a set route or schedule. They go from destination to destination, veering away to pick up customers as calls come in.

If Ion is present, he gives the driver a thick wad of Ordo Veritatis cash to throw out his current passengers so they can converse with him privately. The driver, an acne-scarred tank of a man named Rolan Konovov, complies. (On a 1-point **Forensic Accounting** spend, the player knows this is an option.)

Anthropology: The driver is an ethnic Russian of Siberian descent. His tattoos indicate criminal affiliations and a likely prison stint.

Shown a frame grab of the symp host from the sex club video, Rolan pauses to consider before saying that he took her from the airport to the Megapolis shopping mall. Because she had a card ahead of time, he charged her a special rate, without the usual fees. He did not get her name and did not ask why she had his card if she had never been to Moldova before. She spoke Russian with a Moscow accent.

Bullshit Detector suggests that much of this is deceptive.

(core) **Streetwise** or **Negotiation:** Actually, now that he thinks about it, he drove her to Pridnestrovie. He dropped her off at a hotel in Tiraspol, the Bolot. Rolan offers to drive the team there.

History: Tiraspol is the capital of Transnistria.

Ion, if present, advises the group to hire a different minibus.

Rolan wants a juicy fare more than he wants trouble. But if he feels threatened by the investigators, he uses a specialty smartphone app used by Moldovan taxi drivers to summon assistance. Within a few minutes, five vehicles, from cabs to minibuses, many of them with confused passengers still aboard, roar up to back him up.

PISSED-OFF MOLDOVAN CABBIES**ABILITIES:** Athletics 6, Health 7, Scuffling 6**HIT THRESHOLD:** 3**ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** +0**STEALTH MODIFIER:** -1**WEAPON:** -1 (tire iron)

Use the above stats for Rolan as well, adding Shooting 4 and a small pistol (damage +0).

Escalating to a fight with the city's top cabbies makes it harder to find alternate transportation to Tiraspol. A 2-point **Negotiation** or **Reassurance** spend smooths the waters enough to arrange a ride.

Should you need an alternate driver character, use Stefan Namasco, a blasé man with a scraggly half-beard who plays Romanian pop ballads really loud and keeps hitting and easing off on the accelerator.

Whoever's behind the wheel, the minibus rockets along highway R2 from Chisinau to Tiraspol at heart-stopping speed, with multiple near-misses while passing other vehicles. They arrive in under an hour, which seems shorter than the usual.

TRANSNISTRIA**SCENE TYPE:** Branch Point**LEAD-IN:** Moldova**LEAD-OUTS:** Hotel Bolot, Wolf's Den

Grim-faced Transnistrian officials stop the vehicle at the border. 1-point **Bureaucracy** or **Negotiation** spends whisk the group across the border swiftly and without repercussion. Otherwise the group faces a series of hostile questions about who they are and what business they have in Pridnestrovie. The Ordo exerts no pull here, so they'll have to talk convincingly. Should the interaction start to go south, they'll have to pony up 2 point spends of any plausible Interpersonal ability to talk themselves out of an incident.

After putting local border guards in the rearview mirror, the team sees bored Russian soldiers standing by. They show zero interest in the minibus.

History: Transnistria split off in a 1990 conflict in which hundreds lost their lives. Russian peacekeepers now patrol its border with Moldova. On paper they keep fighting from resuming. In practice they cement Russian control, keeping the area warm for the mother country, whose leadership intends to reclaim any sliver of territory where Russian speakers predominate. Locals appear to desire this; Moldova and the international community don't.

Forensic Accounting: Siberians forcibly relocated to Moldova during the Stalin era dominate organized crime here. They're incredibly hardcore even by Eastern European criminal standards, which is saying a lot.

BRANCH POINT SCENES

Sometimes you may wish to flag a scene as a branch point. This is one in which the players make a decision affecting the direction of the scenario, without picking up a new core clue. Branch point scenes can be transitional, as in this case, marking the shift between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

For the capital city of a post-Soviet quasi-state, Tiraspol boasts a surprisingly contemporary infrastructure, prettified by abundant trees and green space. Pull some cityscape images from the Net if you have a tablet to pass around or another non-disruptive way to share them with players.

They may want their characters dropped off at the hotel Rolan mentioned, or to go to the Wolf's Den.

If Rolan is the driver, he makes the team an offer as he approaches the drop-off point. For \$2000 US, he will not warn the people Irina was meeting with of their arrival. No amount of money can induce him to reveal what he knows about these people. "Is not in my interests to be tortured to death and fed to dogs."

(And yes, Rolan just let slip that he knows the passenger's first name, Irina.)

Galling as this might be, the Ordo can afford two grand to buy off Rolan. A Difficulty 4 **Preparedness** success means that the team has the cash safely on hand; otherwise they can get it by going to a bank in Tiraspol and wasting time making suitably circuitous arrangements. (Don't actually waste the play group's time; just describe the characters' time as having been irritatingly wasted.)

If a player asks to use **Bullshit Detector** on Rolan as he proposes his shakedown, it reveals him as deceptive. Rolan is bluffing. He has a good guess who Irina was meeting, because she asked about the location of the Wolf's Den, but isn't sure. And he's afraid to mess with those guys, even if there might be a payout in it.

Alternate cabbie Stefan, on the other hand, lacks Rolan's organized crime connections and knows little of Tiraspol. He can find out where the Wolf's Den is. Stefan won't try the shakedown. He can get them to the Hotel Bolot, though the team won't know to ask to go there unless they got that info from Rolan before deciding not to use his services.

HOTEL BOLOT**SCENE TYPE:** Alternate**LEAD-INS:** Transnistria, Wolf's Den, Arms Emporium**LEAD-OUT:** Wolf's Den

The Hotel Bolot is a 3-star hotel on Tiraspol's Strada Karl Liebknecht, near its pastel green market district, the Zeleny.

Trivia: Karl Liebknecht, co-founder of the German Communist Party, was summarily executed by government-aligned paramilitary forces after taking part in the 1919 Spartacist uprising.

(Many of Tiraspol's main arteries still take their names from icons of Communism. Strada Karl Marx runs in parallel to it, one block south, with Strada Rosa Luxemburg another block south of that.)

Barely manning the desk at the Bolot is narcoleptic concierge Vlad Khabensky. If the team tries to show him the photo of the symp host, he waves it away without even looking at it. He seeks no trouble from police or security forces or self-evident foreign spies. **Bureaucracy** or **Negotiation** ensures what little cooperation he can actually give. He confirms that he saw her a few days ago. A Chisinau minibus dropped her off. She entered the lobby, but didn't check in. Instead she switched the SIM card in her mobile phone and waited for another car, a black sedan, to come and pick her up.

CopTalk: Getting dropped off at a hotel you're not intending to stay at is classic tradecraft for fugitives and operatives who don't want their movements traced. She meant to lead the Ordo on a goose chase.

The concierge has certainly heard of the Wolf's Den, the city's craziest nightclub. "You do not want to go there," he says, shaking his head.

WOLF'S DEN

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Transnistria, Hotel Bolot, Arms Emporium, Blight Wolves

LEAD-OUTS: Hotel Bolot, Arms Emporium, Going at the Bodyguard, Dragged Before Enteo, Blight Wolves, Monrovia

A few hours with **Streetwise** locates the lowlife cafés where people can speak with personal authority on the Wolf's Den and its habitués.

- ▶ It belongs to the growing empire of arms dealer Yuri Enteo.
- ▶ Enteo grew up among the Siberian gangs here and moved to Russia one step ahead of the cops.
- ▶ He came back as a big time arms dealer and started buying up legal businesses.
- ▶ He draws on the muscle of his clan but otherwise takes little interest in the local mob scene. His affairs are more global in scope.

Research: Interpol and the FBI want Enteo for alleged illicit arms sales to clients in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. The West doesn't even recognize Transnistria, and sure doesn't have an extradition treaty with it. Interpol spiked a recent scheme to infiltrate his organization because of the risk it would pose to the undercover agent.

The Wolf's Den, a converted warehouse on the city's industrial outskirts, opens at 10 PM and closes at dawn. Gargantuan Siberian bouncers stand guard at the door to intimidate anyone who looks like they're here to make trouble.

Impersonate or **Streetwise** allows a team member to assert



the necessary connections to get a group of foreigners who look like they might be affiliated with Western law enforcement through the door.

Here are the numbers you need if relations with the bouncers go awry:

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 12, Scuffling 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

STEALTH MODIFIER: -1

WEAPON: -2 (fists)

Alternately, the group can try to **Infiltrate** its way in through another door, avoiding the gatekeepers, with a Difficulty of 4.

If the group fights the bouncers and loses, go to "Dragged Before Enteo."

During the fight, a character with **Streetwise** realizes that if they let themselves be beaten, they stand a good chance of being taken to someone deeper in Enteo's organization. (The players won't need you to tell them that that this is risky. But then they've already blown their attempt at the hurt-free way in.)

Peak crazy at the Wolf's Den doesn't hit until around 1 AM. At that point the Russian techno starts to pound, vaporized sweat fills the air, and the serious drunkenness and drug intake commences. The clientele looks like the extras from a werewolf movie before the transformations begin. Dealers and prostitutes openly conduct transactions with customers. Bouncers rove the aisles, wading into fights just as they erupt, beating wayward patrons bloody. Over the very long bar, a row of cages inset into the walls holds a pack of many wolves. Though most seem

deadened by the sound (**Natural History:** not to mention probably drugged) they come to snarling life whenever anyone pitches a beer bottle at the cage mesh.

To find the back office, team members need merely scan the room for the most enormous bouncers of all. They form a quartet of guardians around a reinforced steel door.

Streetwise: One group stands out from the other patrons — a knot of men (and perhaps one woman) dressed not unlike the investigative team.

CopTalk: Their bearing suggests police or military training. But their nervous vibe clocks as shady.

These South African mercenaries work as middle men for an extremist Hindu nationalist faction in India. Or maybe a Pakistani front operation masquerading as Hindu extremists. They don't really care, so long as they get their commission. They're here for a preliminary meet with Enteo, hoping to set up a supply line for munitions, assault rifles, and surface-to-surface missiles.

If the team gets them outside the club long enough to deliver them a beatdown, they can pose as these mercs and gain access to Enteo's office.

ABILITIES: Athletics 3, Health 3, Scuffling 6, Shooting 6

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

WEAPON: -1 (combat baton), +0 (pistol)

The South Africans can provide no information relevant to the case. They would rather take a beating than appear weak. Their senior member, grizzled, gruff-voiced demolitions expert Bryce Malan, speaks for the others if interrogated. Other names if needed: Darren Moon, Dean van Heerden, Matty Fransman, Natalie Sumner, Senzo Zwane. All but the last are Afrikaaners.

Players might think of another plausible way of scoring a sit-down with Enteo. If it seems passably credible, it works.

If the team instead tries to avoid a meeting with Enteo and decides to deal with the bodyguards, skip down to "Going at the Bodyguard."

As a prelude to face time with Enteo, the team must submit to a full frisk, including temporary confiscation of all weapons.

(core A) During the pat-down, Enteo's bouncers take the investigators' wallets, purses, and laptop bags and methodically study their contents.

A hawk-faced, gray-bearded man in his mid-sixties, Yuri Enteo conducts business with maximum smarts and minimum bluster. Completely without ideology, he makes the deals that profit him and declines the ones that invite too much risk or promise too thin a margin.

Enteo requires serious convincing to double-cross Irina and squeal to the investigators. He hasn't failed to notice that these new clients represent a new and bizarre development in globalized terrorism. A hardened rationalist, he assumes they just want to use occult imagery as a psy-ops weapon. Genuine supernatural activity lies well outside his frame of reference.

Ordo protocol requires the team to leave the paranormal out of it, but the group might choose to set the rulebook aside here, because player characters. If they do a really amazing job of it, they might succeed.

More likely, they can **Cop Talk** him into deciding that these crazies will bring too much heat on him, or **Reassure** him that the Esoterrorists will never discover that he sold them out.

In response to specific questions, Enteo reveals the following:

- ▶ Shown the picture of the symp host, he identifies her as Irina Maklokova.
- ▶ He has been in contact with representatives of this group, who called themselves the August 9th Movement, for months, via the Darknet.
- ▶ They didn't tell him what A9M's objectives are, and he didn't ask.
- ▶ Yuri does not do business with people he does not meet in person. You have to look a client in the eye to tell if they're going to burn you. So although A9M wanted to do everything remotely, he insisted on meeting with a representative.
- ▶ Sometimes the communications seemed strange, like they were written by a kid. Definitely in American English. He thought it was a hoax, until the money started appearing in his account. Maybe it is just that all Americans seem like children when they write on the Internet.
- ▶ They paid him in installments with untraceable money. And believe him when he says this, Yuri knows how rare truly untraceable money is.
- ▶ Yes, the style of the emails did definitely change recently. [At a time coinciding with the symp summoning and Marshall Powell's sex club suicide.] For one thing, they switched to Russian.
- ▶ When a Russian woman showed up to meet him, he assumed that responsibility for the sale had been transferred to her from the American first contact.
- ▶ A9M purchased several cargo planes full of small arms, ammunition, plastic explosives, and rocket-propelled grenades, and paid for the materiel to be flown to a jungle landing strip in the Sambisa jungle, Nigeria.
- ▶ They have reserved another shipment for next month but not finalized the transaction.
- ▶ The weirdest thing they asked for was for the fabrication of bizarre hand grenades. Though impractical in design, with skulls and bones on the outer casing, Enteo found metalworkers to do the job. These too have all been shipped out.
- ▶ (pipe clue for "Swallowed") Irina also inquired into his ability to acquire commercial flight simulators. He told her he didn't stock that sort of thing but had connections to place a special order, if desired.
- ▶ (core B) Why, yes, of course, Yuri's men examined the contents of her handbag, just as they did with the agents. They noticed a flight booking for what must have been her next destination: Monrovia, Liberia.

Trivia: August 9 was the date of the Manson family's Tate murders.

History: The Sambisa jungle serves as primary hideout for the notorious Boko Haram insurgent group, responsible for a wave of bombings and militia attacks. In 2014 they gained global notoriety by kidnapping over two hundred school girls and announcing that they would be sold as slaves.

ARMS EMPORIUM

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Wolf's Den, Dragged Before Enteo, Blight Wolves

LEAD-OUTS: Hotel Bolot, Wolf's Den, Dragged Before Enteo, Blight Wolves

Enteo lets no one who doesn't work for him enter his warehouse complex—slash—private airport, in a repurposed factory complex a few km outside Tiraspol. The team might decide to infiltrate it anyway, despite the obvious presence of highly armed and clearly disciplined security personnel.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 8, Scuffling 8, Shooting 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: -1 (baton), +1 (shotgun), +1 (submachine gun)

Making it through the perimeter entails a Difficulty 6 **Infiltration** success — as does getting back out again undetected. Enteo's security force has been instructed to capture intruders alive to be "Dragged Before Enteo," below.

Mostly the team finds warehouses full of black-market military materiel. In a secured office area (requires another Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** success) they find an office. **Data Retrieval** allows a copy of its computer's hard drive, with the progress bar counting down in agonizingly slow fashion as security personnel boots crunch loudly just outside.

Presumably later, in the comfort and safety of the team's local accommodations, a 2-point **Cryptography** spend decodes the drive's contents. These allow the team to glean certain of the same basic points as Enteo might give in "Wolf's Den," specifically items 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12. The raw documents lack the interpretive spin they might have gotten (or might yet get) from Enteo himself.

However, the hard drive contents reveal one crucial fact Enteo will never admit to: he also sold Irina a quantity of radioactive waste recovered from the quarantined Chernobyl site.

Explosive Devices: If put into a dirty bomb, that's enough to cover a small city.

Agents looking for a metal shop find it: a standalone structure secured by an easily broken rusty padlock. Pinned to a wall inside they see schematics of the weird grenades, which they might have seen in 3-D form on Marshall Powell's recovered hard drive or heard about from Enteo. They also

find enough discarded pieces to mostly fit one of them together. Once assembled, the distinctive biological decorative filigrees definitely recall the surface morphology of various Outer Dark Entities.

GOING AT THE BODYGUARD

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Wolf's Den

LEAD-OUTS: Dragged Before Enteo, Monrovia

Though the most obvious way to get the core clue leading to Monrovia is to engage with Enteo himself, players might blow that interaction or decide to go at the problem sideways.

Watching the bodyguards at the door to Enteo's office, the team can see that one of them takes evident command over the others. This is Sergey Dronov, a towering figure memorable for his cropped blond hair and extensive burn scarring across the right side of his face.

If the team holds back to see how the South Africans (as described in "Wolf's Den") make their entry, they see the bodyguards frisk them and relieve them of their weaponry. They also observe Dronov going through all of their wallets, studying the contents.

Streetwise: If they do this with everyone, Dronov may have gone through Irina's wallet, and learned something about her the team might need to know.

Highly devoted to his self-image as tough and professional, Dronov won't yield to bribery offers (Negotiation) or threats (Intimidation).

If agents approach him the wrong way he may order his men to deliver a head-cracking, followed by their being "Dragged Before Enteo," below.

Forensic Psychology: Though focused on his duties, his eyes also clock all of the good-looking men in the room, especially the hustlers.

Dronov prefers men but is open to **Flirting** from any team member willing to go home to his depressing apartment with him after his shift is done. After foreplay and copious coke ingestion, he lapses into indiscretion, provided the questioner credibly masks the inquiries as casual small talk from a danger groupie. Declining the drugs without spoiling the mood calls for a 1-point **Flirting** or **Streetwise** spend.

Sufficiently lulled, Dronov reveals that he did rifle through Irina Maklokova's wallet and that she's headed to Monrovia, Liberia, next.

As always, if players come up with some other unexpected yet credible alternative way of getting this information, let it happen.

THE BLIGHT

We thought we were in the wind-down phase when the death dogs came. We'd zeroed the suspects and were dismantling the scaffolding that made up their improvised altar when the howling started. From a distance we figured them for a pack of strays. But of course not even rabid dogs come at you in packs. We opened fire but the bullets went straight through them, spattering the scene with green-yellow slime. It took blades to carve useful wounds into them. Once you opened them up, you saw that they had nothing under their skins but this putrid gel that somehow animated their bodies. It had that stink, the nauseating fetor of the Outer Dark. Jenkins caught a bad bite in the leg and we feared she was ripe to go zombie on us or whatnot. She felt off for weeks afterwards but luckily that was the extent of it.

— after action report, OPERATION ABADDON, Agent Luke Morrison, 04/18/2013

The blight occurs in areas where the membrane has thinned. Two schools of thought divide Ordo researchers on its ultimate source. One says that it arises independently of agent actions. The other posits that blight appears as a response to knowing attempts to reverse damage to the membrane. In other words, it might be the Outer Dark's immune response to Ordo Veritatis activity.

Whatever triggers it, the blight takes the form of spores, invisible to the naked eye, that drift from the demon dimension into our world. They seek out large animals and infest them via airborne infection. Claws, teeth, horns, or other external natural weapons remain intact. The animals die from the inside out, their flesh and bones replaced by a foul gelatinous material granting the skins not only animation but fearsome strength. This substance can be seen leaking from the animals' eyes and mouths as they attack.

Game statistics vary by host animal.



COW, OX,

WATER BUFFALO

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

HIPPO

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

ELEPHANT

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 15, Scuffling 12
HIT THRESHOLD: 2
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +4 (gore/trample)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

LION, TIGER, JAGUAR, BEAR, APE

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 8, Scuffling 8
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +1 (bite)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

DOG, WOLF, BABOON, BADGER, LARGE SNAKE

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +0 (bite)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

CHIMPANZEE

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 8
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +1 (bite)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

GORILLA

ABILITIES: Athletics 12, Health 13, Scuffling 10
HIT THRESHOLD: 3
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +2 (bite), +0 (slam)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

ALLIGATOR, CROCODILE

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4
HIT THRESHOLD: 4
ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1
STEALTH MODIFIER: -3
WEAPON: +1 (bite)
ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

Investigators damaged by blighted animals can't refresh Health beyond their pool level as of the end of the fight for the next two intervals, and lose 2 Athletics at the end of the fight.

Cutting open a blighted creature causes a Difficulty 4 Stability test, to prevent a loss of 4 points.

DRAGGED BEFORE ENTEO

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Wolf's Den, Arms Emporium, Going at the Bodyguard

LEAD-OUTS: Arms Emporium, Monrovia

Team members can wind up bloodied and hauled in front of Enteo in several situations:

- ▶ on a failed infiltration of the club
- ▶ on a failed infiltration of the arms depot
- ▶ by antagonizing the club bouncers
- ▶ by seeming hinky to Dronov or the bodyguards under his command

Their best play when put in this position has them establishing to Enteo that they're not investigators looking into his business, but just random idiots in over their heads. This proves easier in some circumstances than others. Getting out alive requires a credible line of talk and a 2-point spend of **Flattery**, **Impersonate**, **Negotiation**, **Reassurance**, or **Streetwise**.

On a 3-point spend, he might also tell them where Irina is headed, though he won't be as expansive with the other nuggets of information presented in "Wolf's Den."

In almost any case he releases them with the warning that they must immediately leave Pridnestrovie and never come back.

If the team appears to be floundering and appears unlikely to gather the core clue or do anything plausible to keep themselves breathing, Ion might appear with an Ordo backup team to haul their bacon out of the fire. He threatens Enteo with the loss of his business and orders him to answer the team's questions.

Afterwards, he reams them out for forcing him to compromise local organizational security. This allows them to move forward while still retaining the emotional downbeat that ought to accompany a major screwup.

If events have already led Ion to a horrible demise, an Ordo Special Suppression squad performs the rescue. Its squad leader also dresses down the agents afterwards.

BLIGHT WOLVES

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Wolf's Den, Arms Emporium

LEAD-OUTS: Wolf's Den, Arms Emporium

Has the team spent enough time in Transnistria that the absence of overtly supernatural menace seems like an oversight?

Solve that problem by confronting the group with a pack of wolves turned into paranormal weapons by an Outer Darkness parasite.

MONROVIA

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Wolf's Den, Going at the Bodyguard, Dragged Before Enteo

LEAD-OUT: Voinjama

History: The West African nation of Liberia was colonized starting in the 1920s by African Americans, many of them freed slaves.

Languages: Its official language is English; a creole is also spoken.

History: A 1980 coup set off a twenty-five-year cycle of misgovernment, insurrection, and civil war. In the wake of a 2005 democratic election, it has begun to turn around. Current president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

Pathology: Lately Liberia has become a hotbed of Ebola infection, particularly in a county called Lofa.

Monrovia, home to just under a million, blasts the team with wilting tropical heat. Although the city and country are on the upswing, that's from a very low point. Poverty and corruption remain basic facts of existence here.

Its sleepy, developing-world airport receives few inbound flights. Bored drivers milling at the cab stand perk up when the team and other passengers disembark. (They had to go from Chisinau to either Brussels, Paris, or London to catch one of the infrequent international flights here. Drop in this logistical detail only if a player seems to care.)

Cabbie names: Abraham Kollie, Mohammed Jones, Blama Jetto.

Asked if any of them recently gave a ride to a blonde young Russian woman, the cabbies shake their heads. They recognize her from the photo, all right — but she wanted to go to Lofa, where the Ebola is. One by one the cabbies refused to take her, and warned her against it, but she just kept asking. Finally, poor old Friday Bestman, who took a bullet to the skull during the insurrection, agreed to take her. Usually he gets no fares at all, because you can see he's not right just by looking at him.

History: He could have been shot in any number of insurrections.

If asked, one of the cabbies explains that Friday took his bullet in the final 2003 uprising. He fought for Charles Taylor.

History: President of Liberia from 1997 to 2003, Taylor became one of the continent's most notorious warlords. He is now imprisoned in England, serving a fifty-year sentence for crimes against humanity.

Lofa lies to the north and east, about a five-hour drive away. **Negotiation** allows the group to tempt a cabbie into Ebola territory with a huge chunk of cash. For less money they can buy a jeep and drive through the jungle themselves.

(core) One of the cabbies volunteers that he heard the Russian lady say something about a clinic, and that she wanted to go to Voinjama. That's Lofa's main city.

Pathology: The World Health Organization maintains a clinic in Voinjama.

VOINJAMA

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Monrovia

LEAD-OUT: Clermont's Lab

The trip from Monrovia to Voinjama entails a rugged drive through barely extant hilly roads. Sometimes a bridge over a river or ravine consists of nothing more than some old boards laid out between the two sides.

The debilitating trek costs the agents a number of General ability points. Multiply the number of PCs by 4. The players then decide how to distribute these point losses between them. They can spread the loss evenly but aren't obliged to. Players can subtract points from Athletics, Health, Preparedness, or Stability.

For each separate pool loss, invite the player to describe something bad happening that reduces the pool. For example:

- ▶ Athletics: "I tear a muscle while getting the jeep unstuck from the mud."
- ▶ Health: "I think I'm getting a little feverish."
- ▶ Preparedness: "One of my duffel bags drops into the gorge!"
- ▶ Stability: "A trip across a rickety bridge reawakens my childhood fear of heights."

Home to a little more than twenty-five thousand people, Voinjama is a crossroads city not only of nations and cultures but of religions. Markets bustle. Mosques tower alongside church spires.

Architecture: A significant chunk of the buildings are uninhabited or underused.

History: This city suffered badly during the various civil conflicts and has been seriously depopulated.

Anyone on the street can give directions to the WHO clinic.

Its administrator, Dr. Margit Raab, places a low priority on fielding inquiries from outsiders of unclear agenda. She deflects the agents with polite but German firmness, until shown by **Bureaucracy** that they have some official standing to nose around in her clinic. She affirms that Ebola has flared up again in the area. The stats are as bad as they've been since the outbreak that began in the summer of 2014. She does not recognize the picture of Irina Maklova, but does recall seeing a man matching Friday Bestman's description waiting in a car outside the facility several days ago.

Pathology: WHO is one of the best known of the United Nations' dedicated agencies. Because Ebola rages across borders of nations that lack the wherewithal to deal with it, WHO takes a leadership role in combating it.

- ▶ Ebola hemorrhagic fever is communicable from blood or fluid contact.
- ▶ New outbreaks often begin when someone comes into contact with an infected monkey or fruit bats. Bats carry the disease without being susceptible to it themselves.
- ▶ Symptoms start two days to three weeks after first contact, starting with a low-level fever indistinguishable from mild

influenza. The mid-stage brings on nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Then comes the kidney and liver failure.

- ▶ The most terrifying symptom strikes some but not all infected individuals. In the late stage, they bleed out from every orifice. This of course creates ample opportunities for others to be infected by their blood.
- ▶ If you're infected your chance of survival could be as high as fifty or as low as ten percent.
- ▶ However, as seen in the 2014 wave of infections, an airlift to a modern first world hospital hugely better those odds.

Anthropology: You'd think people in Ebola threat zones would stop eating monkeys and fruit bats, but when you're hungry, you're hungry.

As you might expect from an international aid organization, most of the top clinic staff come from the developed world. Locals are more likely to be junior or menial workers.

Dr. Raab strongly discourages visitors, no matter how heavily credentialed, from entering the actual sick wards.

Pathology: She's absolutely right to do so.

However, the team can see other staffers coming and going even if they stick to the safer administrative areas.

If they choose to check out the staff for signs of hinkiness, **Forensic Anthropology** notes that one young man has had a tattoo on his forearm removed recently.

(core) **Trivia:** Though its traces are hard to see, and its owner has covered it up with a layer of foundation makeup, this is the logo of defunct Norwegian death metal band Døderektum.

Occult Studies: It disbanded after its lead singer gutted its former bass player as a sacrifice to Satan. Døderektum fandom acts as a gateway subculture for Esoterror recruitment.

The owner of the removed tattoo is Sebastien Clermont, a pasty man in his late twenties who dies his sandy hair dark black.

Sebastien says he put himself forward to work for WHO because he comes from a family of doctors. All of them put in time with NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières before settling into lucrative practices back in France. Though a lab tech, not a doctor, Sebastien felt the family call. (He makes this statement with a bit of an eye roll, as if indicating that he bowed to pressure and regrets ever coming to this awful place.) He denies any connection to Esoterror, the occult, Irina Maklova, or Friday Bestman. His nervousness as he makes this last statement sends **Bullshit Detector** pinging big time.

CLERMONT'S LAB

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Voinjama

LEAD-OUT: Gwoza

Following Sebastien after he leaves the clinic for the day requires a Difficulty 6 **Surveillance** test. It's harder to shadow someone unnoticed in a place whose rules you're not used to, especially if you stand out in a crowd. Reduce Difficulty by 1

if the character's background suggests a prior familiarity with African cities. Reduce Difficulty by 1 if the character can pass for African. These bonuses stack.

Whether it succeeds or fails, the test leads to a shuttered, abandoned-looking building.

Architecture: This looks like a former medical facility.

If the test fails, Sebastien realizes that the group is after him. His anxiety attracts a group of rampaging, blighted chimpanzees. They've been stalking the outskirts of the city ever since he arrived, ready to strike any enemies of the Outer Dark who might show up to disrupt his activities. They lope down the streets and launch themselves at the investigators.

Pathology: Chimpanzees sometimes carry the Ebola virus!

(This is a false alarm; the virus can't live in the bodies of blighted creatures. Nonetheless, the thought increases the potential Stability loss of the encounter to 5 from the usual 4.)

Like regular chimps, these monstrous versions attack by trying to bite their targets' faces off.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -3

WEAPON: +1 (bite)

ARMOR: +6 vs. Shooting

Sebastien isn't summoning the blight chimps consciously. If he sees them, he faints from terror. After they're dispensed with (if they show up at all) he has no physical defense to offer against whatever treatment the agents dish out to him.

He folds under **Interrogation**. None of this matters, he declares: soon the world will change forever. The membrane will tear and all of the mortal servants of the Outer Dark will be harrowed from their graves to rule the world eternally. (Nonsense, but **Bullshit Detector** shows that Sebastien believes it.)

Part of his prior story is true: he felt pressured to risk his life in some hellhole or another to live up to his siblings and impress his domineering parents. Once here, he realized that he had to kick back at a world that had turned him into a coward and a weakling. So he started trawling the Net for hints of a movement he first heard about through his death metal interests. Those idiots, he eventually discovered, knew nothing, but by then he'd contacted Marshall Powell, a great wizard from California. Marshall told him to stockpile a large supply of the Ebola virus and wait for someone to show up and give him the password — "Pacific dawn." Not long ago, a hot Russian chick arrived and said just those words to him. Sebastien can take them to see her, if they promise to be very, very nice.

He leads them to a small room containing a freezer. Inside lies the frozen corpse of Irina Maklokova, in a body bag, stacked on top of several others.

Pathology: Irina died from the Ebola virus. No one should handle the body without a hazmat suit.

Any agent handling her body with anything less than rigorous concern for the biohazard involved must pass a Difficulty 6 **Medic** test or become infected by the virus.

A character infected by Ebola makes a Difficulty 4 + x **Health** test each day, where x is the number of previous tests taken for Ebola exposure. On a failed test the character loses 6 Health every four hours, and can refresh Health only when an attending physician passes a Difficulty 12 **Medic** test. (Difficulty 6 in a state-of-the-art first world hospital.)

Forensic Anthropology: Investigators taking the risk of performing an autopsy on Maklokova's body find a hollowed spot in the upper chest cavity. If they've already subjected a previous symp host to an autopsy, they recognize this from before.

The other bodies belong to Voinjama locals, all of whom died of Ebola infections. None of them present with unusual chest cavities.

Teams who have already run through "Geoslashers" ought to immediately suspect that the symp has changed hosts. Other groups may take longer. Or maybe not; it's a familiar horror trope and the characters shouldn't have to act dumber than the players on this.

Also in the freezer, the team finds vials of frozen blood. **Pathology** (and a test using proper equipment) confirms that these are contaminated with the virus.

An examination of the contents of Sebastien's lab quickly zeroes in on a particular workstation. Lying on the lab table are disassembled parts of the weird grenade the group may have found the specs for on Marshall's computer, or rejected spare parts for in Enteo's arms depot.

Ballistics: If you reassemble them, you can see that they're gas grenades. A small rectangular payload, about the size of a watch battery, is suspended inside a bubble of propellant and then sealed. When the grenade is thrown, the impact of landing causes the housing to fall apart. The propellant breaks apart the contents of the payload, dispersing it over a wide area.

Chemistry: Other nearby equipment freeze-dries and dehydrates a quantity of liquid, forming it into the rectangular payloads.

From these details the group probably doesn't need Sebastien to confirm that the payloads weaponize tainted blood. These are Ebola grenades.

If asked, Sebastien further reveals:

- ▶ that Friday Bestman took the payloads with him and headed off for parts unknown
- ▶ that he seemed kind of dull-witted and sluggish until the Russian chick got sick. Then he suddenly seemed dynamic and alert
- ▶ that Friday asked to use his laptop

(core) **Data Retrieval:** Bestman used the WaltzMaps app to plot a car route from Voinjama to Gwoza, Nigeria. The app returned a forty-six-hour trip taking him to the Gulf of Guinea coast, through Abidjan, Accra, and Lagos, and then in

a southeasterly direction deeper into Nigeria. It also supplied two alternate routes, each an hour longer. One alternate route takes a slightly more northerly route into Nigeria from Lagos. Another moves through the hearts of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo before heading into Nigeria.

If the team hasn't completely secured Sebastien (a condition he does his best to avoid), he lunges for one of them as the clue-gathering portion of the scene subsides. He tries to jab one of them with a hypo full of Ebola-tainted blood. If the players took pains to establish where they are in relationship to him, he goes for the closest target. Otherwise he tries to jab the agent who gave him the roughest time, emotionally or physically.

A Difficulty 4 **Scuffling** test allows the target to evade the attack. On a margin of 2 or more, the defender can elect to instead jab Sebastien with his own hypo. The team might then debate what to do with him. An Ordo custody team can't sweep in and extract him if he instead needs to be quarantined. They can take him to the WHO clinic, where he will as likely as not die. Or they can leave him restrained in his lab, where he will certainly excruciatingly die. This last coldblooded choice requires a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a possible loss of 5.

If they don't infect him, the agents can call for an Ordo support unit to transport Sebastien to a secure facility. With the PC team needing to move on to Gwoza, this Africa-based support group can take on the task of removing biohazardous material to the safety of the WHO clinic and then burning the rest to the ground. Depending on timing the PCs may see the smoke column as they leave town on their way deeper into the continent.

GWOZA

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-IN: Clermont's Lab

LEAD-OUTS: Ellis Sherman, Dirty Bomb

If the group takes the comparatively urban coastal route, they lose only 2 General ability points from the overland journey. Players decide for themselves whether to subtract these from Athletics, Health, Preparedness, Scuffling, Shooting, or Stability.

By taking the interior route, they have to ding themselves 5 points each.

As they enter the insurgent-riddled province of Yobe, a government patrol confronts them. These less than dedicated exponents of official authority want either a bribe, a bullying opportunity, or both. On a 1-point **Bureaucracy** spend, or if the group has already asked if they have a local contact and therefore can throw Charles Kelani's name at them (see below), the soldiers can be persuaded that the agents have too much pull to mess with. A 1-point **Intimidation** spend makes the agents seem too dangerous to confront. 1 point of **Negotiation** represents a sufficient bribe to let the soldiers happily go about their way. Agents unwilling or unable to de-escalate must submit to a search which costs them 4 points of Preparedness as the

soldiers commandeer key bits of gear. Players decide between them who loses the points.

Failing that, the soldiers open fire. These opportunists retreat into the bush as soon as two of them are hit.

LOCAL FORCES

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 12, Scuffling 4, Shooting 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

WEAPON: +0 (machete), +2 (assault rifle)

+2 damage during first round of fight. Entire group flees after two of them take damage.

There are as many soldiers as player characters.

Natural History: The village of Gwoza lies near the Sambisa jungle. This former game preserve was once stocked with wild animals in an effort to promote safari tourism, but that all went to pot years ago.

(repeated from above) **History:** The Sambisa jungle is the hideout of the notorious Boko Haram insurgent group, responsible for a wave of bombings and militia attacks. In 2014 they gained global notoriety by kidnapping over two hundred school girls and announcing that they would be sold as slaves.

Additional info, as players plumb their **History** knowledge for more on Boko Haram. Provide these in response to specific questions.

- ▶ The group's official name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, or People Committed to the Teaching of the Prophet and to Jihad.
- ▶ Boko Haram means "Western education is forbidden" in the local Hausa tongue, and was applied to the group by townfolk of the city of Maiduguri, which the group has attacked in the past.
- ▶ The group takes a line in the Koran classing all nonbelievers as transgressors to murderous extremes. As far as they're concerned, it's not enough to be Muslim — if you're not their kind of extremist Muslim, you become a legit target for murder.
- ▶ In fact, among their chief assassination targets are the region's emirs, traditional Muslim leaders whose mere existence calls Boko Haram's authority into question.
- ▶ They forbid not only associating with the government and getting a Western education as crimes — they also decry voting, trousers, and dress shirts.
- ▶ They fight to create their brand of Islamic state.
- ▶ Founded in 2002, they started military operations in 2009.
- ▶ Its present leader is Abubakar Shekau, who periodically takes to social media to gloat over his shocking operations or proclaim the joy he takes in fulfilling God's demands to slay.
- ▶ Supposedly killed by security forces in 2009, he popped up a year later, very much alive.

CHARLES KELANI

If asked, Kelani can explain to the team the difficulties of being an Ordo asset in an ill-governed developing nation. He can't call on the resources they in the first world typically command. Here the government works more as a bribe extraction operation than a functional bureaucracy. Charles can keep an eye on problems and report when the membrane seems more than usually threatened. But he can't assemble even a handful of people he can trust to be honest and competent at the same time. Kelani had some possible recruits lined up, but they all departed for richer nations to be educated. Charles doesn't count on too many of them returning.

Occult Studies: Widespread belief in occult forces paradoxically offers a margin of error here. In a place where people accept the existence of the supernatural, weird occurrences don't spark as much cognitive dissonance as they might in Des Moines or Milton Keynes.

- ▶ He took over from the group's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, killed while in government custody, also in 2009.
- ▶ Or was he? Every so often, someone reports seeing Yusuf still at large.

These real-life rumors may act as a red herring if the team concludes that members of the leadership possess uncanny death-defying powers.

Forensic Anthropology: Boko Haram members believe in the everyday manifestation of supernatural forces. Its rank and file members take great pains to avoid being haunted by their victims' ghosts. In the early summer of 2014, a large contingent of them fled Sambisa, ostensibly from bees and snakes possessed by vengeful ghosts.

Once in Boko Haram territory, investigators might contact a local expert, like Ordo-affiliated Nigerian special forces squad leader Charles Kelani — see sidebar. His take skews toward the practical over the scholarly.

The village of Gwoza sits on a plain between rocky, arid hills. A few of its one-story structures boast terracotta roof tiles. Residents regard strangers with apprehension, but visibly relax as soon as they see that team members are clad in Western garb and are therefore not murderous guerrillas. Boko Haram regularly raids settlements around here, attacking people and burning down buildings. Foreigners with guns must be here to fight the insurgents. At this time, in this place, the devil they don't know has to be better than the one they do.

However, they remain circumspect if asked to give assistance, as they know that some of their neighbors are secretly in league with Boko Haram. People might briefly talk with the agents, but always out of sight, and never to the point of revealing their own name.

(core) **Anthropology:** The emir of the mosque, already a Boko Haram target, might be willing to talk. Naturally he must be shown the proper deference.

Alhaji Umar ibn Usman Askirama (Alhaji is his title) greets the group with wary dignity. At thirty years old, he's young for the job. All of the elders who ought to hold it have been shot or driven away. He softly asks his attendant, a mute young man with shrapnel wounds on his arms and face, to bring tea. Before inviting questions, he deplores the fact that Nigerian forces cannot stop these killers, and that it is necessary to invite the assistance of random strangers.

Much of the trouble in the last few months has been stirred up by Babuji Bako, a former bicycle repairman turned terrorist. Some say he is in line to replace Abubakar Shekau, if anything happens to him. He disappeared into the jungle a year ago. His neighbors describe him as an intense, quietly angry man.

Not long ago a witness Askirama declines to identify saw several transport planes circling for a landing. Based on their position, there must be a landing strip out in the jungle. Until now the rebels have equipped themselves from the limitless supply of rifles and explosives floating around central Africa. The thought that someone from the outside now helps them inspires great worry. The emir can't think who would be mad enough to do so — some syphilitic Gulf prince with more money than scruples, perhaps?

Askirama points to a likely spot on the map where the jungle airstrip might be. He says he reported this to government forces, who so far have done nothing about it.

If present for this meeting, Kelani ruefully shrugs. It is entirely possible that his superiors already know about the airstrip, and are planning to act. Or they're dragging their feet, due to internal rivalries within the military.

(alternate core) A frightened townsman might, with enough **Reassurance**, point to the landing strip. He's the one who saw the circling plane and reported it to the emir. A lifelong logger and hunter, he has always been very good at estimating distances. Just don't ask for his name.

ELLIS SHERMAN

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Gwoza, Insurgent Attack

LEAD-OUT: Insurgent Attack

The investigators might ask if any Westerners have been seen in the area. Their interlocutors direct them to Ellis Sherman, a rugged, square-shouldered man who looks capable of kicking all manner of ass even though he's well into his forties. He casually wears a sidearm holster containing a Glock 14. Ellis presents a business card identifying himself as a project coordinator for Thirsty World, an NGO specializing in bringing clean water to developing nations.

Trivia: Thirsty World was started by prominent celebrity [fill in an appropriate real name].

Forensic Accounting: Thirsty World deserves its reputation for spending donor money well.

Languages: Ellis' accent places him as a native Oklahoman.

Anthropology: Everything about his bearing and manner suggest a military background.

A team member might ask him if water is really the first thing this war-torn region needs. He shakes his head and says something like:

"Every human needs water. But you make a point, I'm sorry to say. I came here to evaluate whether it would be safe for an NGO to operate here. And the answer I'm gonna have to give the higher-ups is *negatory*."

If asked about airstrips, he says he heard rumors of one but could never pin them down. He always looks into air cargo possibilities when evaluating the feasibility of a proposed project. His best guess places it a few miles to the northwest, but that could be wrong. (And is.)

Bullshit Detector says that Sherman is lying about something.

In fact, he's here to meet the Colonel, who will instruct him in the rituals needed to bring about the operation in the final scenario, "Swallowed."

He clocks the team as OV as soon as he lays eyes on them. When they meet up with him, he has already accomplished what he came here to do and is preparing to leave. He has no plans to be in town when the Colonel's dupes set off their dirty bomb. If the team shadows him, he does his best to waste their time without tipping his hand.

If the team doesn't look for Westerners, he might make his cameo in other ways. He could show up to shoot back at Boko Haram insurgents during either their optional preliminary attack on Gwoza or the doomed final one. Or he might just sidle up to a canteen when an agent buys food for the team. Sherman wants to find out if they're here for him. As soon as he confirms that they're working the Ebola grenade angle, he stops making inquiries that might arouse their suspicions.

Ellis Sherman returns in "Swallowed."

INSURGENT ATTACK

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction / Alternate

LEAD-INS: Gwoza, Ellis Sherman

LEAD-OUTS: Ellis Sherman, Dirty Bomb

Boko Haram members walk among the townsfolk of Gwoza as their friends and neighbors — until they reveal their true allegiances by taking part in a raid or assassination.

You might include a firefight with insurgents if:

- ▶ agents spend too much time dithering in the village without getting any nearer to the core clue
- ▶ agents go about their investigation too obviously
- ▶ players don't seem scared enough
- ▶ players seem hungry for action

INSURGENTS

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 6, Scuffling 2, Shooting 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -1

STEALTH MODIFIER: +2

WEAPON: -2 (knife), +2 (assault rifle)

In an initial fight, two more insurgents than agents appear.

Describe the first insurgent to make a failed attack as having thrown a weird grenade covered with bony bits. It lands in the middle of the agent group... but then (you might roll an additional die here for dramatic effect, if your players dig that sort of thing)... it fails to go off.

After the battle, they can confirm that this is one of the grenades they've seen before, as specs on Marshall Powell's computer, discarded fragments in Enteo's weapons depot, or disassembled in Clermont's lab.

Ballistics: It wasn't put together quite right, so the impact pin didn't burst the propellant sac. Otherwise it would have dispersed its payload over everyone — agents and insurgents alike. The difference was a matter of millimeters.

Pathology: That payload brick is full of live Ebola virus, all right.

Players can declare that any downed insurgent is not dead but incapacitated. The youngest of the captured yields to **Interrogation**, providing the location of the airstrip, as an alternate means to the core clue from "Gwoza."

DIRTY BOMB

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Gwoza, Insurgent Attack

LEAD-OUT: The Colonel

Babuji Bako built his airstrip in a dense patch of forest to Gwoza's northeast. No roads lead there; the group will have to rough it overland. As they move toward it, a sense of indefinable dread pervades. Ask for **Stability** tests (Difficulty 4), specifying to players that they do not stand to lose points from their pools. For those who fail, ask them to describe a flashback scene to the worst thing their character ever did. (You may recognize this as a trick we're borrowing from the first edition of *The Esoterrorists'* sister game, *Fear Itself*.)

A character with **Forensic Psychology** who isn't having a flashback senses the distress of any investigators who are. Symptoms include flushing, sweating, and contracting pupils.

Flashbackers can see no obvious reason why all of a sudden their minds would rush back to those terrible moments, whatever they might be.

As the team draws nearer to the airstrip, they'll either take precautions to arrive unannounced or charge in, letting their assault rifles do the talking. In the latter case, the players clearly want a fight, in which case they get one. The insurgents guarding the airstrip, and the hastily constructed shack alongside it, constitute the hardest of the local Boko Haram hardcore.

HARDCORE INSURGENTS**ABILITIES:** Athletics 8, Health 9, Scuffling 6, Shooting 6**HIT THRESHOLD:** 4**ALERTNESS MODIFIER:** +1**STEALTH MODIFIER:** +1**WEAPON:** +0 (machete), +2 (assault rifle)

This fight includes as many hardcore insurgents as team members. One of these is Babuji Bako, recognizable as leader from the orders he barks at the others. Unless your players are completely asleep at the switch, they'll choose to keep him alive for later interrogation.

If on the other hand the group decides to stealth its way in, a Difficulty 5 **Infiltration** test gets them alone with Bako in his shack. To do this players must describe a way of drawing away the other guards that plays as credible. Don't make them overthink this: any classic diversion technique suffices.

The other insurgents may return to shootingly interrupt the team's confab with Bako if:

- ▶ they make a tactical mistake that would logically lead to this
- ▶ the players seem disappointed by what feels like an anticlimax

Bako doesn't want to give away any information, but sure loves to talk. Like any megalomaniac, he brooks no **Intimidation**. But **Interrogation** or **Flattery** inspires him to rant. Once in full rhetorical flower, he drops his reserve, allowing the group to coax the following from him:

(core) He takes his orders not from Abubakar Shekau, but from the Colonel, who dwells deeper in the bush.

- ▶ The Colonel is a holy djinn, sent by Allah to exterminate that which is forbidden.
- ▶ The Colonel used his divine wiles to entice stupid infidels to supply Boko Haram with devastating weapons.
- ▶ Some of the weapons were flown in by foreign arms dealers.
- ▶ That's why Bako built an airstrip, to receive these shipments.
- ▶ With these, Bako will use the weapons of the West against it, and against those who embrace its evil doctrines.
- ▶ Bako will proudly bathe in the blood of a thousand infidels.
- ▶ Only through death on an unprecedented scale can the world be purified, and the perfect Caliphate restored.

History: Like many of his power-tripping ilk, Bako justifies his rampages with a call to the past that is actually quite modern.

It doesn't even take a cursory search of the shack to turn up more Ebola grenades, and something even more terrifying — the nearly completely assembled components for a radiological weapon, plutonium payload included.

Confronted about these, Bako happily confirms that these are the weapons of the West he has been talking about.

Explosive Devices: The bomb would certainly work. Its fallout would immediately kill or fatally sicken everyone in Gwoza. Detonated in a more populous area, it could kill tens of thousands, maybe more.

(1-point spend) The payload was scavenged from the ruins of Chernobyl. No other technician in the world could determine this, but fortunately the character has been working on a genius experimental method for detecting trace isotopes.

THE FATE OF FRIDAY BESTMAN

As soon as Friday Bestman and his symp arrived with the Ebola payloads and showed him how to install them in the grenades, Bako shot him six times in the chest. Bako has enough trouble having to take orders from the Colonel. He sure wasn't about to let another supernatural entity start bossing him around. He buried Bestman in the same nearby shallow grave containing subordinates who displeased him or questioned his authority. This can be found with a cursory inspection of the airstrip and **Evidence Collection**.

Forensic Anthropology shows that the bullets killed both host and symp.

THE COLONEL**SCENE TYPE:** Climax**LEAD-IN:** Dirty Bomb**LEAD-OUT:** Assault on Gwoza

Entering the area of the Sambisa where Bako says the Colonel dwells, agents feel a growing sense of anchorless dread. The jungle causes a Difficulty 4 Stability test vs. a possible loss of 3, *just because of the way it feels*. You know: the way it makes you think there's something at the edge of your vision, but, when you look at it, it's gone already.

Soon afterwards, the sky darkens. Compasses go crazy. GPS devices conk out. Radios and other communications devices lose power. The smoke that comes out of them smells of rotting meat. Attempts to turn around, if anyone is so cowardly as to try, cause the group to go in circles.

Ahead of them, they feel a malign presence. Whichever way they try to head, they wind up moving toward it.

Then they start to see visions. Bloodied, burned, or otherwise ruined figures peep out from behind tree trunks.

If the group has already completed other scenarios in this book, they see the people they killed, or saw killed, along the way.

Or they see the Powells, and the various sex club victims.

Or others horribly killed either in previous scenarios in your series or in various PC backstories.

Or scenes from their Worst Things They Ever Did flashbacks, which they can interact with but never change for the better. Only for the worse.

Visions occur to only one person at a time. No one else can see anything; the agent appears to be reacting to empty air, up in the distance.

Each vision requires a Difficulty 4 Stability test, against a possible loss of 5. Increase the loss to 6 or 7 in the case of a particularly devastating ghost encounter — an agent's murdered sister causes more trauma than an insurgent who got deservedly shot in the head last session.

(pipe clue for “Swallowed”) Then the entire group sees an airline pilot stumble out of the brush, covered in blood. This vision doesn’t correspond to any event in anyone’s past.

Trivia: That’s a Singapore Jetways uniform.

The pilot screams, as if being gnashed by great, invisible teeth. If an agent rushes to try to save the pilot, he turns out to be insubstantial.

The teeth do not: Difficulty 6 **Athletics**, or take +2 damage.

With or without a rescue attempt, the pilot is torn to shreds in front of the team’s eyes. Gobbets of flesh fly toward them, then disappear on contact.

Difficulty 5 **Stability**, vs. a possible loss of 5.

After the group moves on, the jungle becomes increasingly strange and hostile. Pungent ichors sweat from the trees. Deformed albino bush pigs storm from the underbrush, as if fleeing something terrible, then die at the group’s feet, reeking of formaldehyde.

A fog rolls in; its tendrils poke and prod at the agents, wetly trying to get inside their clothes. Difficulty 4 **Stability** vs. a possible loss of 3.

Treated wounds open up and start to weep pus. Anyone with less than a full Health pool loses 2 Health.

After yet more circular trudging, the shrieking of unseen apes resolves into recognizable speech: “Ocean Game! Ocean Game! Ocean Game!”

Occult Studies: The Ocean Game is a psychomagical fugue state induced by one of the most powerful and intelligent classes of Outer Dark Entity, the Mystery Man. Mystery Men usually target a single individual and over a period of weeks and months draw them into a hostile environment. In this unreality zone, subjective fear takes on palpable physical substance. Until now, Mystery Men have behaved as deliverers of personal horror. Never before has one been known to undermine an entire culture, or take an interest in insurgency or politics.

Give the players time to draw the inference: if a Mystery Man controls this Boko Haram faction, that represents a bone-chilling new escalation of their interference in human affairs.

As soon as the group has had this anagnorisis, or it’s clear that they’re not going to make the leap, they come to the edge of a pool of gore. Hacked-up bodies float in it. Visible from the bottom of the nose up is the oversized, pulsing, bald skull of the Mystery Man.

“Welcome to the beginning of the end of the world,” he tells them.

They now have the chance to enter into a dialogue with an intelligent ODE who is not intending to kill them. Instead, he wants them to take reports of its existence and scheme back to headquarters, to spread fear through the OV hierarchy. Anyone aware of him can later be visited and pulled into an Ocean Game — if there is a later, as far as the world of humanity is concerned. The Colonel does not volunteer this aspect of its scheme. But you might let it slip in the face of extremely tricky questioning.

The Mystery Man won’t just monologue information at them. For what he reveals, he wants juicy, greasy thoughts in return. For each question he answers, he demands one awful revelation



from a team member. He has been feeling their thoughts since they approached the airstrip and knows enough about them to ask leading questions. It might want to hear about a character's:

- ▶ moment of greatest fear
- ▶ greatest dread for the future
- ▶ worst regret
- ▶ most appalling thought, not acted on
- ▶ most heinous crime
- ▶ most hated fellow teammate, and why

The Colonel wants to prolong the game. Mystery Men are all about games. So he gives a solid bit of information when an agent coughs up a true confession. On the other hand, his own Bullshit Detector can't be fooled. He rejects proffers of fact that clearly seem to you to be withholding, deceptive, or vaguely sketched.

The nuggets of information it trades them could include:

- ▶ awful facts about their own lives
- ▶ tying up loose ends in this scenario, or the other Worldbreaker cases they have already investigated. (It reveals nothing about upcoming cases, except for the hints about "Swallowed," below.)
- ▶ any unanswered questions about the Powells and the lead-up to the sex club slayings
- ▶ If the agents find a way to destroy him, they merely dissipate his form temporarily on this meager gray reality.
- ▶ He'll find his way back. Human fear and need always draws him back here. Even when he doesn't want to come.
- ▶ Moles, enslaved to the Outer Dark, infest the Ordo Veritatis. They render all the efforts of the honest dupes, like the agents, useless. (This is the one untrue thing the Mystery Man says.)
- ▶ The Outer Dark didn't make Boko Haram or any of the other maniacs who run riot over the earth killing in the name of god or justice. That's a human thing.
- ▶ Yes, the agents foiled this one excursion, with the grenades of pestilence and the bomb of slow devouring. But their victory will be short lived, for they have extended the days until the final working only slightly.
- ▶ If asked about the symp's attempt to get flight simulators from Enteo, the Mystery Man smiles, revealing a row of razor-sharp teeth.
- ▶ *It's not the Outer Dark that makes the world evil. It's humanity, with its collective cesspool of anxiety, greed, dominance and hate, that makes the beings of the Outer Dark.* (To the extent that you can, delay this revelation to serve as capper to the scene. It occasions a Difficulty 6 Stability test against a possible loss of 4 to all who hear it.)

Once the energy seems to drain out of the scene and the players strain to think up new questions, the Mystery Man sinks into the pool of blood and body parts, vanishing from sight. Diving into the pool requires a Difficulty 4 Stability test against a

possible loss of 6. It does not bring the character any closer to the Mystery Man. He is hiding in a membrane fissure, because, again, he doesn't want to fight them. He wants them to infect the Ordo with paranoia.

ASSAULT ON GWOZA

SCENE TYPE: Coda

LEAD-IN: The Colonel

As the team returns to town, remaining Boko Haram forces attack it. Assuming that the team has done something to set them back, for example by killing or capturing Bako, taking out other insurgents, or confiscating their Ebola grenades and dirty bomb, the attack plays out as a damp squib. A volunteer militia roused by Charles Kelani confronts the last few dead-enders and, taking only a few casualties, finishes them off.

If however the agents have so utterly failed that only a horrifying result seems apt, the insurgents release the dirty bomb. Agents test **Health** against a Difficulty of 8. Those who fail die of radiation poisoning during the break between this scenario and the next, and must be replaced by fresh PCs. A new wave of terror-driven fear grips the world, significantly thinning the membrane. Difficulties of directly opposing ODEs, including Hit Thresholds, increase by 1 for the rest of this campaign.

SEND IN THE DRONES

SCENE TYPE: Denouement

For all its potential for destabilizing awfulness, this case hands one advantage to the team. Its supernatural element occurs only behind the scenes, requiring little or no veiling out.

What it could use, however, is a drone strike aimed right at the Mystery Man's pool of blood. Like he already explained, it won't destroy him. But leaving him in place would surely be worse. OV assets in the unofficial NATO targeting division send the group the trademark black and white kill-cam footage of the strike, for whatever consolation that grants.

Until he comes back in a later scenario of your devising, haunting one of the Ordo functionaries who read their report...



SWALLOWED

A PASSENGER AIRLINER DISAPPEARS WITHOUT A TRACE OVER THE PACIFIC. When Esoterror keywords start showing up in the ensuing wall-to-wall news coverage, agents spot dangling threads from the various conspiracies arising from the San Francisco sex club murders. They realize they're the team best positioned to figure out what really happened to flight SJ713.

SINISTER CONSPIRACY

Former CIA agent Ellis Sherman has assembled the pieces necessary to finally and utterly destroy the membrane, ushering in the end of humanity as we know it. Esoterror operatives trained under his auspices have hijacked SJ713 and flown it to an island. On this Pacific atoll, newly created by fear and anxiety generated during the previous cases, the passengers will be slowly fed to the Emerging One, the most enormous Outer Dark Entity to ever break through the membrane. When it reaches its full size, it will burst forth, tearing apart the membrane worldwide.

TRAIL OF CLUES

A **Pilot Flashback** tips the agents to a relationship between the plane's disappearance and a premonition they endured during "Heart of Outer Darkness." They check out cable anchor **Wallace Cherry**, who has been framing the story in

supernatural terms. **Assembling the Picture** lets them turn prior pipe clues into leads to follow now. They might probe into the black-market **Flight Simulators** Yuri Enteo was involved with, find clues in the Zurich offices of a shell company called **Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung**, or brace Washington, DC, viral marketer **Vera Hampton**. Looking into an NGO called **Thirsty World**, also a dangling thread from "Heart of Outer Darkness," leads them to mastermind **Ellis Sherman**, or at least the bloody trail he left behind. Following up on the weird tattoos previously encountered in "Coulrophobia" leads to **Jerrod Peoples**, who stands in for the many malcontents seeking a new life by attending the sinister bacchanal Vera's company sponsors. **Vial Behavior**, picking up a thread from "New Crystal Maiden," leads to a Bangkok suburb. Elsewhere in that great urban sprawl, a **Bangkok Chop Shop** holds the location of **The Island** where all this will soon go down.

Once on the island, the team must choose between a recon of the **Fuselage Bacchanal** or charging headlong into an encounter with the Emerging One, in **The Eater and the Eaten**.

ANTAGONIST REACTIONS

The Emerging One fights back if the team tries a frontal assault along with SSF jarheads in **Copter Assault**. Vera Hampton, the island's guards, and celebrants, and of course the Emerging One itself all offer potentially lethal resistance.



SCENES

PILOT FLASHBACK

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-OUTS: Wallace Cherry, Assembling the Picture

Have each player in turn briefly describe what their agents might be doing on a typical, unremarkable day in their ordinary lives. Ask them to wrap each brief description by checking the news. Inventive players will describe their agents doing this in a variety of ways that reflect their characters' age and occupation: checking an RSS feed, looking at Twitter, passing a newspaper box, having cable news blared at them from an airport lounge TV monitor, and so on.

Then a news story catches their attention: Singapore Jetways flight 713 from Phnom Penh to Taipei has lost contact with air traffic control. Multiple passenger mobile phones made contact with cell towers since the last radio signal from the cockpit. Singapore air force and coast guard have scrambled to search for wreckage. However, the possible radius in which the plane could have gone down is massive. They are now seeking aid from neighboring nations in widening the search.

Supply these facts about the flight, as provided in the news report, in response to player questions:

- ▶ It was supposed to take fifteen hours.
- ▶ Most of the passengers were Taiwanese nationals returning home after a Cambodian vacation.
- ▶ A delegation of clean energy experts headed for a symposium in Taipei also traveled on board.
- ▶ Some family members report receiving calls from passenger cell phones. What they hear varies: nothing, electronic interference, or eerie, unintelligible yowling.

Tell the players that learning of a missing Singapore Jetways flight gives them chills. Depending on how recently you played "Heart of Outer Darkness," a player might without prompting remember the hallucination of the injured pilot in the SJ uniform (p. 74). Give the group a few seconds to bring it to mind. Otherwise, fill in the memory gap by describing a likely agent having a vivid, sweaty flashback to that scene.

At this point the players will likely think to call in to their handlers and warn them that this event may have an Esoterror connection. Suggest that the characters would do this as standard procedure if it doesn't occur to the players.

If the pilot hallucination from "Heart of Outer Darkness" did not occur in your version of the scenario, or if no agent who had it still survives, start instead with "Wallace Cherry," below.

WALLACE CHERRY

SCENE TYPE: Intro

LEAD-INS: Pilot Flashback, Assembling the Picture

LEAD-OUTS: Assembling the Picture, Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Vera Hampton

If you played the previous scene, the action now jumps ahead a couple of days. SJ713 is still missing. The media, particularly cable news networks, have gone into full frenzy mode over this one. With a constant stream of unreliable reports and wide leeway for speculation from deskbound anchors and their expert guests, it hits their sweet spot of high drama and low budget.

Interest in the story spans the globe. Early sensor readings by OV research teams show the membrane thinning worldwide. Damage reaches a dangerous peak throughout the Pacific Rim.

It is now Sunday morning. Last night, on top cable news network W24, second-string anchor Wallace Cherry actually asked a guest the following:

"We've been looking for rational explanations for this. And that's probably where we'll find them, in fact and logic. But as the story goes on, with so many weird details we can't account for, isn't it time to start wondering if some truly unexplainable force took that plane? Every Sunday we go to church and consider the supernatural. Why are we ruling it out when talking about a truly puzzling disaster like this one?"

As the team's current Mr. Verity explains, Cherry's words could spring from one of two sources: stupidity, or malice. Esoterror regularly spreads information, some of it true, through their media flunkies, intended to stoke fear and degrade the membrane. Verity assigns the team to determine which profile Wallace Cherry matches: buffoon or Esoterrorist?

Verity's briefing book gives them Cherry's address in a posh residential district of Washington, DC. The team can intercept him on his 6 AM jog, before he gets into his car to go to the studio, or in the coffee shop on the retail floor of the office structure where W24 headquarters its DC bureau.

Cherry has taken part in enough tough interviews to put up a strong front under pressure. At first he defends his comments as a legitimate avenue for exploration. When a team member goes at him hard, he falls back to a second position: hey, when you're live on air, you have to keep talking, and sometimes you hear yourself saying something you maybe wouldn't if you sat down to write it out.

If the players make him say this by accusing him of being up to something, the response triggers **Bullshit Detector**.

(core) **Forensic Accounting** allows an agent to access his private financial records. They reveal a series of payments, putatively for speaking fees. The checks were written on the corporate account of a firm called Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung.

Research shows that Cherry's rare paid speaking engagements in no way correspond to the dates of the payments. Also, he just netted his biggest payment of all, hours after his remarks about the missing flight and the supernatural.

On a 1-point spend for both of the above abilities, the relevant players may specify in mid-interview that this legwork already happened. (Other options: 1) The players actually already thought to check his financials before bracing him. 2) They go away, do the digging, and come at him a second time.)

Armed with this information, the team can get him to spill by either offering not to tell his bosses (**Negotiation**) or pressing his head very hard against the hood of a car (**Intimidation**).

Well, any form of **Intimidation** will do, really. We don't mean to be over specific.

In response to pertinent questions, Cherry reveals the following:

- ▶ His mortgage has been underwater since the financial crisis. You need to look flush to rise at the network. So sure, he took an opportunity for a little extra cash when it came his way. But he never compromised his integrity as a newsman.
- ▶ (alternate core) The arrangement was set up by a woman named Vera Hampton.
- ▶ He met her at a cocktail party thrown by the big agribusiness conglomerate, Archer Daniels Midland.
- ▶ She represented a viral marketing firm called Vivonics.
- ▶ All he had to do was insert certain keywords she supplied into his off-the-cuff banter and interview segments.
- ▶ These were never brand names, so his bosses could never come at him for inserting unauthorized ads into his copy.
- ▶ After a while Vivonics started requesting that keywords appear in relation to certain news stories.
- ▶ The news stories they chose kind of surprised him. Typically sponsors don't want to be associated with disasters, murders, and political crises.
- ▶ Over time the words grew darker in tone, and harder to fit into his remarks. Words like despair, suicide, madness, fear, and surrender.
- ▶ But the checks grew steadily larger, so he got creative.
- ▶ This latest time, with the downed jet story, he was given more detailed instructions than ever before. He had to not only work in the word "supernatural" but suggest that the disappearance maybe had an unearthly cause.
- ▶ He knew he'd catch flack for saying something so ridiculous but they threatened to expose him if he balked now.
- ▶ And, yes, they upped his fee even more: a cool twenty grand just for saying one bonehead thing.
- ▶ It wasn't even the stupidest thing a cable anchor said that day.

The team can decide what to do about Cherry. They might bust him to W24 executives, demand that he warn them of any future contact from Vivonics, or hold what they have on him to turn him into an unwilling OV asset.

Alternate takes: If this is your intro, start the action in the same place, but update the players on the basic facts of the story as given above. In this instance the OV called them and put them into action as part of a broad effort to determine whether Esoterror provoked the incident, has been stoking

fears according to its usual opportunistic MO, or is uninvolved. In doing so they are following their standard protocol in the wake of a high-profile catastrophe. The agents have taken part in these broad investigative efforts before, though it never came to anything and so did not happen onstage in your series.

In yet another version, you might describe each agent separately tracking down a different possible lead, with only the Wallace Cherry angle panning out. These might reflect their specialties or backgrounds:

- ▶ The agent with the best **Shrink** rating interviews an institutionalized schizophrenic patient who tried to stab her nurse. The patient believed the nurse to be one of the "monsters" who downed the flight. (The patient, Anabelle Jefferson, is a sensitive picking up on evil intentions leaking through the membrane. But she has no useful information to supply beyond vague intuition.)
- ▶ An agent with **Forensic Accounting** tracks down rumors of curious movements in Singapore Jetways' stock prior to the crash. (Totally groundless — the stock took a big dip, but as part of a general haircut to the airline sector.)
- ▶ An agent with **Pathology** checks out a report that one of the passengers showed symptoms of bubonic plague in the Phnom Penh departure lounge. (A false report based on a mistranslation of an unremarkable interview with a witness in Phnom Penh.)
- ▶ The team's **Ballistics** expert works on a computer model figuring out where the plane could have been shot down from, were it hit by a surface-to-air missile. (Which turns out not to be the case.)

Create similar scenes specifically keyed to various agents' most notable traits.

This shows the Cherry lead as just one among many — the one that happens to go somewhere. Some players may feel sidelined if relegated to a quickly narrated color scene at the outset. If you use this approach, put the Cherry scene at the end.

ASSEMBLING THE PICTURE

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Pilot Flashback, Wallace Cherry

LEAD-OUTS: Wallace Cherry, Flight Simulators, Tattoo Hunt, Ellis Sherman, Vial Behavior

In the early going, either before or after the Wallace Cherry sequence, describe the team members as having one of those ultra-cinematic deduction sequences in which flashback shots swirl around on CGI vapor trails and the sound track makes the whooshing noises we all hear when we think really hard.

Tell them that their subconscious deductive minds are sorting through the huge mass of data and experience they accumulated over the course of the symp cases and picking out the key points that somehow feed into the plane disappearance.

These elements include:

- ▶ a clue or image from the investigation of the Powells
- ▶ the sex club crime scene
- ▶ the video image of the symp-possessed quartet leaving the club

However, the scene only occurs if the group noted, uncovered, or participated in at least one of the following:

- ▶ Zach's tattoo (p. 18; core for "Tattoo Hunt")
- ▶ Blood vials (p. 56; core for "Vial Behavior")
- ▶ Flight simulators (p. 64; core for scene of the same name)
- ▶ meeting Ellis Sherman (p. 72; core for "Ellis Sherman")
- ▶ the chat with the Colonel (p. 74)

Somehow, the group realizes, all of these things fit together. But how? Time for more legwork.

FLIGHT SIMULATORS

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Assembling the Picture

LEAD-OUTS: Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Jerrod Peeples

Law: Since 9/11 intelligence agencies have kept watch on who buys flight simulators for commercial aircraft. Regulations in various jurisdictions require that they be sold by licensed operators with impeccable security credentials, and only to legitimate aviation entities, from airlines to training schools.

Cop Talk: A check of international law enforcement databases reveals that the leading seller of illicit flight simulators is Roel Govaerts, a Belgian national.

According to the dossier, he banks in Zurich, where he was last seen, four months ago.

He travels often to East Asia and the former Soviet bloc, living out of hotels. If he maintains a permanent place of residence, Interpol doesn't know it.

At one point he was photographed with Transnistrian arms dealer Yuri Enteo.

If the group is on non-shooting terms with Enteo after the events of "Heart of Outer Darkness," they might return to the Wolf's Den in Tiraspol (p. 64) to quiz him about this. Govaerts has vanished without paying him in full, leaving Enteo looking for payback. He cheerily supplies it, by telling the team what he knows:

- ▶ He sold Govaerts a number of damaged, obsolete, or gray-market flight simulators over the years, which he had refurbished somewhere in Thailand.
- ▶ Govaerts took possession of them in Transnistria and shipped them himself, so Enteo doesn't know exactly where in Thailand.
- ▶ The Belgian's credit was good until four months ago, when he disappeared.

- ▶ Hoping to cut out the middleman, Enteo had one of his men leech the data from Govaerts' phone when he was occupied with a hooker.
- ▶ (core for "Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung") From this he concluded the client was a shell company out of Zurich called Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung. He has yet to follow up on this, since he hasn't come into possession of another flight simulator since.

If agents can't or don't want to talk with Enteo again, they can go to Zurich, or talk via phone to Interpol liaison Mirjam Egger.

(alternate core) Should they go to Zurich, you can stop it from being a dead end by having Egger show them a photo of Govaerts coming out of the building housing the Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung office. She tried to reach someone there but never did, eventually letting the detail slide.

EICHHORN HUNOLD VERWALTUNG

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Wallace Cherry, Flight Simulators, Vera Hampton, Ellis Sherman

LEAD-OUTS: Vera Hampton, Thirsty World, Jerrod Peeples, Ellis Sherman, Bangkok Chop Shop

Forensic Accounting: Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung belongs to the countless legion of obscure shell companies incorporated in Switzerland. Its incorporation papers list a physical address on Zurich's Zähringerstrasse. That could easily turn out to be a post office box operation or some other umbrella service to give the illusion of physicality to an entirely notional company.

The agents may debate whether to travel to Zurich or to depute a local OV team to check it out.

If they delegate, they soon get word that a bomb detonated in the office during the infiltration, killing two agents, permanently incapacitating another, and leaving another two temporarily sidelined. Agents who argued for delegating make Difficulty 4 Stability tests against a possible loss of 3. They also get a plastic bag containing a shattered hard drive recovered from the ashes.

If they go themselves, they find that the Zähringerstrasse belongs to the city's Kreis (neighborhood) 1. If plump and prosperous Zurich had a low-rent district, this would be it. The office is a second-floor walk-up atop a hair salon.

Once on the scene, a Difficulty 6 **Infiltration** test determines whether a bomb goes off when agents enter the premises. Anyone present for the explosion tests **Athletics** against a Difficulty of 4. Characters who succeed lose 2 Health. Those who fail lose a die of damage +4. The explosion destroys the contents of the office, including the hard drive containing all the core clues.

Absent an explosion, the office on first glance appears cheap, spare, and uncommunicative. A pile of unopened junk mail lies beneath the mail slot.

Evidence Collection: From the postmarks, it's clear that no one has sorted through the mail in the last four months.

Battered furniture that looks like it was picked up at a police auction sits next to an empty water cooler and an emptier filing cabinet.

Natural History: Mouse droppings lie under the baseboards; cockroach eggs, along the windowsill.

Forensic Anthropology: That stain on the floor under the throw rug might be blood. But it's been scrubbed, making an uncontaminated DNA sample unlikely.

Evidence Collection: However, the severed finger behind the filing cabinet might be worth looking into.

Fingerprinting (and a check of the Interpol database) IDs the amputated digit as belonging to Roel Govaerts, a Belgian national wanted for the illicit purchase and resale of commercial flight simulators.

CopTalk and a visit or call to Interpol leads to a conversation with Mirjam Egger, an officer of the Federal police on loan to Interpol. She shares the following:

- ▶ Govaerts was in the business of buying and refurbishing commercial flight simulators, mostly from the developing world. Some of his clients might have been hardscrabble third world airlines hoping to save money by circumventing security procedures. However, a disgruntled ex-accomplice pleading out on unrelated charges accused him of meeting with al-Qaeda splinter groups. As goes without saying, they would not have a benign reason for wanting to own flight simulators.
- ▶ He employed technicians to upgrade the simulators and then resold them. They apparently worked out of a shop in Bangkok. Thai police have not prioritized requests to track it down from this sketchy description. They might have been bribed, or simply unconcerned with a crime unlikely to affect Thai citizens.
- ▶ Born in Belgium but constantly on the move, Govaerts did his banking here, in Zurich.
- ▶ Efforts to apprehend him stalled when he dropped completely off the grid four months ago.

HARD DRIVE

In the explosion-free scenario, the hard drive has been encrypted and then wiped. Accessing the data requires **Cryptography** and **Data Retrieval**.

Also, if the device remains intact it becomes apparent why its owner risked leaving it behind: **Forensic Anthropology** shows that it's spattered in human blood. It would be more incriminating on its owner's person than in a hastily abandoned hideout.

A player might not reconstruct events to understand that whoever left this place had to have had a bomb sitting around, to use in the event of an emergency. From here one might surmise that its owner wanted to take out any investigators who might be poking into his affairs.

Occult Studies: This spiteful tradecraft typifies the highly trained contingent of Esoterror operatives.

If the laptop was blown up, none of this can be divined without also spending 1 point of **Data Retrieval**.

Either way, the team recovers only a portion of the hard drive's contents. However, they do get a big chunk of email downloaded from a private server. It consists of terse messages from the laptop's apparent user, who identifies himself only as ES.

The emails stop four months ago, the last time the computer was used.

- ▶ (core for "Ellis Sherman") Some consist of apparently legitimate communications with a Los Angeles-based NGO called Thirsty World, which brings clean water to the developing world. (If the team met Ellis Sherman in "Heart of Outer Darkness" and heard him claim to work for Thirsty World, players may remember this detail on their own. If not, let them grope to recall until it becomes tedious — which will be quickly — and then remind them. Their characters would remember, even if they don't.) Ellis Sherman owned this laptop.
- ▶ (core for "Bangkok Chop Shop") **Document Analysis:** A much more cryptic set of communications connects the laptop's user to someone with the initials RG. In the early exchanges, RG is illegally selling ES refurbished, upgraded flight simulators. RG suggests that ES send his trainees to Bangkok, where the simulators are. ES finds this convenient, as he has other business in Thailand. Later RG starts to extort ES for hush money. The last message finds ES inviting RG to pick up his USB drive full of Bitcoin at this address.
- ▶ *With the initials RG and the mention of illicit flight simulators, plus Cop Talk, the team can get the Interpol information on Govaerts, as above.*
- ▶ (core for "Vera Hampton") ES also communicated extensively with Vera Hampton, of the Washington, DC-based viral marketing firm Vivonics. The most fragmentary of the interesting sections of email, these exchanges reveal little of the nature of their business. However, **Forensic Psychology** points to something weird. ES frequently explains basic concepts that anyone older than five would know, for example what a passport is, why people need food and water, and why attendees at a party might expect music. It's as if he's explaining to a quick learner how to successfully pose as a human being.

VORTEX WRAITH

I came to in a chilly room with corrugated metal walls. Running through my mental list of obscure businesses the Glendenning family kept up as part of their cloak of normalcy, I pegged it for an emptied-out utility closet in their ice factory. I tried to get out of the metal chair I was slumped in but no dice. They'd zip-cuffed me by the wrists behind the chair. Each of my ankles was duct-taped to one of its legs.

Not so long later I heard the door unbolting. Harry Glendenning, the one who didn't look, sound, or act like any of the others, came through the door. You'd expect your ordinary sadist to grin, or walk with exaggerated slowness, or tut-tut, or whatever move a maniac uses to gloat over his dominance when he has you over a barrel. Still nothing — his expression and manner were just as dead and unrevealing as ever.

He asked me in that barely inflected monotone to identify the other members of my Ordo Veritatis cell. I asked him if he was adopted. I'd done a records check on him, I said, and the earliest documentary proof of his existence dates back to 2009. Harry didn't blink. He repeated the question. So this time I told him to piss up a rope.



Carelessly, I thought, he had left the door open. This would be my opening, somehow, to escape. That's what I told myself.

Harry's body folded in on itself, becoming a set of floating blood vessels wrapped around a twisting, hypnotic null-space, encased in a blur of utter darkness. Briefly he reassumed humanoid shape, leaping onto the ceiling like an insect. Then he leapt on me as a shower of pain. My flesh tore; my bones broke. The chair crumpled beneath me; I leapt to my feet, limping, wincing in agony. I ran down a dark and unfamiliar corridor.

I felt a whooshing of air over my head. Now the creature Harry had turned into stood in front of me. It thrust a shard of nothingness into my gut, pulled out my intestines, and shoved them in my face.

It did a lot else, too, before I finally died. Now my stolen consciousness occupies a triangle of pulsing anti-matter, afloat in the howls of the Outer Dark. They've extracted everything I know about you. Ripped from my body, my mind could not resist their commands. Now they've forced me to record this message.

They want you to know they're coming.

— transcript of an .AIFF audio file found on the hard drive of Mr. Verity 820, 24/12/2014. Voice analysis identifies it as a skillful but not exact mimicry of the voice of agent Galen Hobbs, missing since 07/11/2014.

Vortex wraiths arise when needed from the turbulent energy of the Outer Dark. They leak through the membrane in order to express its will to invade our world. Once through the membrane, they adopt human form. Exactly how they select their bodily appearance remains a matter of controversy among the Ordo Veritatis' ODE researchers. The current default theory is that a newly arrived, formless vortex wraith scans the unconscious mind of the first person it encounters, searching for physical traits this random bystander associates with persuasiveness, power, or status. The human shells of vortex wraiths always seem in some way attractive or charismatic. These visual cues enable them to prosper in society despite their initial lack of familiarity with it.

Even when they've been here a while and picked up the basics, they retain a cipher-like quality. Beings of pure intellect and intention, they lack personality or individual identity. That their fundamental detachment does not impede them much speaks to our tendency to react to people according to what they look like, and to project emotional qualities we desire onto others. Unlike the bulk of ODEs, vortex wraiths derive no apparent pleasure from inflicting torment on humankind. Nor do they feed on us. They pursue missions meant to pierce the membrane with soulless, algorithmic efficiency. They act as effective instruments of a force that happens to be evil and destructive. Though capable of abstract thought, they can no more evaluate their actions on moral or ethical grounds than a virus can consider the impact of its replication on its host.

Vortex wraiths collaborate with human Esoterrorist assets, arriving to help particular individuals accomplish their specific, current goals. When destroyed, or when the mission concludes, they dissipate. Perhaps their energies return through the membrane; perhaps not. If the Outer Dark does reabsorb them, no evidence yet exists of a vortex wraith preserving memories, goals, or other identity remnants over successive incarnations.

Vortex wraiths attack only when completion of their mission leaves them no better option. To do this they must revert to their energy-being states. In this mode they flit back and forth between a roughly humanoid shape composed of roiling blacks with fuzzy gray edges, and a completely formless mass surrounded by floating red manifestations that look like blood vessels. They can grow appendages and shape them into weapons to fit the needs of the situation. These might range from saw-like arms to spike-covered hammers.

Only at the moment of the killing strike do they show a momentary hint of the Outer Dark's passion for sadism, dispatching their victims in as shocking a manner as the situation allows.

Vortex wraiths always work alone.

Use vortex wraiths when you need ODEs capable of cooperating with Esoterrorists. They grant you some variety when you need a servitor creature in human guise but have already used symps recently.

GAME STATISTICS

ABILITIES: Athletics 14, Health 18, Scuffling 18

HIT THRESHOLD: 7 vs. Shooting, 5 vs. Scuffling

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: +4

WEAPON: +4 (anti-matter tendrils)

ARMOR: None

When a vortex wraith hits an opponent, every other opponent that has damaged it during the current fight also takes this damage. A vortex wraith always attacks the opponent that most recently damaged it. If it has not yet taken damage, it attacks the opponent with the highest Scuffling pool; break ties with a random die roll.

Visualize this for players by describing its floating red vessels sprouting from the body of the opponent it hits and zipping out, Taser-wire style, to pierce the victim's allies. The tendrils wrap around or phase through any solid barriers between victims.

VERA HAMPTON

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Wallace Cherry, Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Thirsty World, Tattoo Hunt, Vial Behavior

LEAD-OUTS: Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Tattoo Hunt, Vial Behavior

Research: Vivonics' street address places it in an anonymously modern highrise on Washington's Wisconsin Avenue.

Attempts to contact her ahead of time for an appointment stop at her receptionist, Brad Heathman. He puts them off with perfect bored professionalism. Vera is too slammed managing an upcoming event to take on any new clients at this time, he tells them. When the team shows up in person to breeze past him, they may feel that his ear gauges and hipster mustache contrast oddly with his expensive business suit. A civilian with no knowledge of Vera's true nature or agenda, Brad has no reason to disbelieve her and reads as honest to any **Bullshit Detector**.

Maybe the team waits to buttonhole Vera when she leaves her office, or circumvents Brad's entirely mundane interference techniques in some other way.

With her upswept red hair, cat's eye glasses, and fashionable business wear, Vera looks like a manic pixie dream girl grown up and gone corporate. For a social media marketing guru, she comes across as strangely detached, as rehearsed or robotic.

Her initial cover stories depend on what direction the team comes at her from.

If asked about supplying keywords to Wallace Cherry, she claims to have been hired by a client whose identity she cannot

reveal. Off the record, though, she can tell them the media keyword scheme is part of a study by a market research firm. The firm wants to determine the impact, if any, of negative trigger words on responses to the advertising that appears around it. Were this revealed, it would skew the data, so she asks the team to respect the importance of this psychosocial research and keep this story to themselves. If players question the ethics of this study, she appears baffled, as if unfamiliar with the concept.

If asked about her connection to Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, she says that it hired her to find a bottled water company willing to partner with Thirsty World. Thirsty World, she says, is an NGO that digs clean wells in places that don't have them. She names the real-world famous person who helped found it.

On a specific mention of Ellis Sherman, she identifies him as her contact at Thirsty World. If told that the NGO disclaims all association with him, she attempts to express shock and confusion.

Her reaction to any suggestion that she has a peculiar manner, or that the email exchanges between her and Sherman are in some way odd, elicits a complete non-reaction.

Characters trying to get a sense of her with **Bullshit Detector** realize that she lacks all standard behavioral tells. She seems neither obviously truthful nor clearly deceptive. It's as if she's voicing lines fed to her on an invisible headset.

What Vera does next depends on the degree to which the agents tip their collective hand. Should they truly manage to come off as bored investigators into some utterly routine matter, she senses trouble but decides not to risk drawing attention to

the mission by going after them. More likely they'll come on strong, like typical PC investigators, making it plain that they suspect her of Esoterror links. In this case, she uses her inhuman powers to find them alone and attack them. She might invite Brad to head home for the day, stall until he heads out the door, and then try to murder the team right in her office. Chances are she'll have to get them sometime later.

Vera can be destroyed but not captured. Under no condition does she supply useful information to the investigators. Her mere existence does confirm that they're on the right track.

Brad the receptionist has no clue as to Vera's true identity but fears her all the same, as an intimidating and demanding employer. Unless they can somehow establish that she's gone for good, without revealing information that shouldn't fall into civilian hands, he clams up.

After they dispatch Vera, getting into her office and accessing her computers poses little difficulty. However, the contents have been secured to minimize exposure to Sherman's operation.

(core) **Data Retrieval:** Aside from the attempt to seed media reports with keywords enhancing the Esoterror value of the airliner story, Vivonics' main activity appears to have been the organization of a big promotional event. For months now it's been placing heavy ad buys on websites geared to a twenty-something, primarily male demographic. Sites run the gamut from car culture to gun bunnyism to death metal. A program also scours the Internet for trolling activity and targets advertising at the angriest, most antisocial posters. When users click through to the ads, they see one for an all-expenses-paid party vacation to an undisclosed exotic locale. To enter they must fill in a questionnaire. Although the ads don't specify the product they're promoting, hints indicate that it might be a new brand of extreme energy drink. Subjects who post a lot about drinking and partying receive a variant approach from a bogus vodka brand. The vodka supposedly looks like black ink in the bottle, turning clear when poured.

Players may remember a similar recruitment modus operandi from "Coulrophobia." If not, further ability use points in the same direction.

Forensic Accounting: Though it seems to be calculated to extract demographic data, the questions asked for that purpose are actually garble. They must be a smokescreen for something else.

Forensic Psychology: Many of the seemingly innocuous questions instead check for psychopathic and/or sociopathic tendencies. They also test how easily led the form-filler might be.

Apparently those respondents meeting certain criteria received invitations to the event, including free airfare from wherever they were in the world.

(core clue for "Tattoo Hunt") However, they had to fill an onerous condition: getting a large tattoo on their forearms, with the design supplied to them in the invitation. The image looks like a series of intertwined appendages, like tentacles with serrated saw blades on the end. Squinted at from a distance,

it also looks like a baleful visage. (1-point **Data Retrieval**) Invitees were supposed to use a special photo-active ink that glows under UV light. But from the recoverable fragments it seems that many had trouble following the secretive instructions to pick up their vials of ink, or finding tattoo parlors prepared to use ink from an outside source.

Occult Studies: The tattoo's overall design recalls markings made by Outer Dark Entities and the Esoterror magicians who summon them.

A separate list of flight bookings suggests that hundreds of contestants were selected. Brad booked them all on separate flights, all of which have taken off by now. Nor is there a single destination: flights terminate throughout the Pacific Rim.

Forensic Accounting: A series of leasing agreements suggests that the winners were collected in various cities by private transportation companies. The Vivonics laptops lack information on what the final destination might be. (**Cop Talk:** This likely represents tradecraft. Vera may not have known herself, with another party contacting the transpo companies with coordinates to the party site.)

Based on the departure times listed for the flights, winning contestants will all have departed by now. Invitations list a start time for the event beginning in less than forty-eight hours.

The closest respondent with a flight ticket is Jerrod Peebles of Seven Corners, Virginia. See "Jerrod Peebles."

Data Retrieval reveals the email exchange with ES and his company "Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung." See that scene for a description of its contents.

A 2-point spend also recovers the following text fragment, which appears in an email from Vera to ES.

"[fragment begins] essential that Emerging One remains encocooned in [unrecoverable] until fully manifest. It will know not to venture from the safety of the fissure. But if lured out, failure [fragment ends]"

This puzzle piece may lead a clever group to take a supply of the ODE-luring crystals from "Geoslathers" to the final encounter.

THIRSTY WORLD

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Ellis Sherman, Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung,

Vera Hampton

LEAD-OUTS: Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Vera Hampton,

Ellis Sherman

Thirsty World maintains offices in a plush skyscraper near Beverley Hills, CA. Its spokesperson, fast-speaking fundraising veteran Zoe Meredith, can be reached by phone, or, if the investigators feel they have the time for a cross-country flight, in person. Either way, she tells them that the group has never heard of Vera Hampton, let alone employed her. Nor does it have any knowledge of, or dealings with, an entity called Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung. Scammers often pretend to represent real charities in order to bilk people. So if those people were

claiming a connection to Thirsty World, they were obviously running some kind of con.

Ellis Sherman they have heard of: two years ago, they found out he was falsely representing himself as a Thirsty World projects manager. They hired a private detective to track him down and amass enough information on him to lodge a fraud complaint. Soon afterwards a government official who declined to identify herself showed up in the office to ask the Thirsty World CEO to drop the entire matter.

(core for “Ellis Sherman”) This woman heavily implied that she was from the CIA, and that Ellis Sherman was an asset of theirs.

This did not end Ellis Sherman’s use of their name. Thirsty World execs found this extremely troubling. Their legit project people could easily be endangered in any number of the developing nations they work in if they were mistaken for CIA agents. The last report of Sherman presenting himself with Thirsty World credentials occurred over a year ago.

Forensic Accounting: Thirsty World does appear to be on the up and up.

In person, agents can use **Bullshit Detector** and see that Zoe answers their questions truthfully. They can also pick up a signed photo of the real-life celebrity you’ve chosen as the founder of Thirsty World, posing with happy children in front of a high-tech well in Bolivia.

JERROD PEEPLES

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: Vera Hampton

LEAD-OUTS: Flight Simulators, Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Tattoo Hunt, Ellis Sherman, Vial Behavior, Bangkok Chop Shop

Jerrod Peeples lives in a middle-class subdivision in Seven Corners, a tranquil outer exurb of Washington, DC.

When the investigators show up asking questions about him, his mother, a drawn woman in her late fifties drinking coffee from a super-sized convenience store cup, wilts. “What has he gotten himself into now?” asks Brenda Peeples.

She knows nothing about Jerrod’s whereabouts, but senses that it can’t be good. Shown the tattoo design, she affirms that he just got that hideous thing put on his arm.

Brenda tells a tale of a son who was never quite right. He’s been troubled since kindergarten. Now verging on his thirties, he’s never held down a job for more than six months. He gets into physical altercations with anyone who disrespects him. However grandiose his schemes, he never works toward them. Over the past few months Jerrod gained a sense of direction and became quieter and more focused. Brenda hoped this would lead to something, but then he up and vanished. She’s been hoping that maybe he enlisted in the military, as unlikely as that sounds, problems with authority and all.

A few days before he left, they had a huge fight over his refusal to help out with even the most basic household chores. He told

her he was about to be one of the world’s most important figures, then went to his room to crank up his ear-blistering music.

Jerrod took his laptop with him.

VIAL BEHAVIOR

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Assembling the Picture, Ellis Sherman, Bangkok Chop Shop

LEAD-OUTS: Vera Hampton, Jerrod Peeples, Bangkok Chop Shop

During “New Crystal Maiden,” the team may have discovered that its bad guys were shipping the blood of ODE victims to Nonthaburi, Thailand. At that point, the trail went cold. But in the intervening period, Thailand’s thinly stretched Ordo Veritatis assets have found a few new leads. Mr. Verity contacts the team to tell them this if it doesn’t occur to players to follow up.

A secure call placed to Thai colleague Thanapat Kulhong reveals the following:

- ▶ Several months ago [after the events of “New Crystal Maiden”], several truckers were killed in hijackings of refrigerated vehicles. The official investigation assumed that they were taken for their contents by particularly ruthless small-time criminals. Knowing to be on the lookout for an Esoterror cell or cells shipping blood products, Thanapat accessed the case files. The cops suspected a duo of brothers, Kaeo and Witthaya Pongpas, but couldn’t make the case.
- ▶ Or, Thanapat must concede, maybe they took a bribe.
- ▶ Barely a crime exists that doesn’t appear somewhere on the rap sheets for Kaeo and Witthaya Pongpas — but only in the arrest column, never as a conviction. Sex trafficking and torture-murder of witnesses stand out in particular. They’ve also been hauled in countless times for alleged smuggling of drugs and other contraband.
- ▶ They maintain their supposedly legit business, an embroidery sweatshop, in Nonthaburi, not far from the notorious Big Tiger prison.

Law: The prison’s official name is Bang Kwang Central Prison. But only officials call it that.

Thanapat works in the IT department of the Royal Thai Police. Though a civilian, this post allows him covert access to police databases. He’s strictly an OV support operative, without the skills or inclination for field work. If the agents ask, he’ll detail a local fixer, indebted to him when he erased some damning details from his criminal record, to assist them while in Thailand.

This contact, Sudket Kugasang, is a skinny man with bad teeth in his mid-thirties. He warns the group when he meets them that he will sell them out if his life is threatened or his enemies name a better price. He may owe Thanapat a favor, but he remains a businessman.

A point of **Intimidation** or **Negotiation**, spent as soon as he makes this disclosure, ensures his loyalty. Otherwise, depending on what opportunities the group gives him, he may find a way to turn on them.

Alternatively, a character with **Languages** can spend 1 point of it to also speak passable Thai for the duration of this scenario. This is a special case dispensation from the usual Language rules.

In yet a third option, a character who can justify a stint in Thailand as a backstory element can pay a point of any Investigative ability the player can tie into this newly revealed background element. For example, a character might have spent time here researching classical Thai art, and can spend a point of **Art History** to speak enough Thai to get by here.

Trivia: Nonthaburi might have been a separate city from Bangkok once, but it has long since merged into a single sprawl. Though legally its own entity for all practical purposes, everybody treats it as part of the seething conurbation that is Bangkok.

THE BOLD APPROACH

Kaeo and Witthaya can be found at their sweatshop.

Approaching it, the team member with **Architecture** notes that the area's power lines have been tampered with, to draw way more power into the building than any structure around it. Less surprisingly, the meters have been gimmicked to report falsely low electricity use to Bangkok's power utility.

Once inside, the group sees a couple of dozen elderly women hand sewing fashion and sports logos onto baseball caps and other clothing items.

- ▶ **Forensic Accounting:** Clearly, these products are knockoffs.

The burliness of both Pongpas brothers makes them look more Samoan than Thai. They wear loud shirts open halfway to the navel, with cascades of cheap gold necklaces dripping down onto their chests. Both keep their hair in long, unwashed ponytails. Kaeo can be distinguished from Witthaya because, as the younger of the two, his doesn't have gray streaks in it.

- ▶ **Forensic Anthropology:** They are on either meth or coke. A lot of it.

They do display one odd common feature though: both have circular rashes around their mouths.

- ▶ **Pathology:** They suffer from ringworm infections. This fungal infection passes from host to host through bodily contact — for example, kissing.

Adopting postures suggesting a familiarity with the violent arts, they deny any knowledge of any blood smuggling operation.

- ▶ **Architecture:** The low vibration of the shop's wooden floorboards indicates a large bank of refrigeration units below.

If an agent accuses the two of having a sexual relationship (as the communicable ringworm scars indicate), Kaeo attacks Witthaya, accusing him of having a big mouth. This allows the group to overpower them both without having to resort to full-on combat fight. Two team members pay 1 **Scuffling** apiece to make this happen. Otherwise, they prove surprisingly difficult to handle.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 24, Scuffling 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +2 (+1 if they haven't met the agents yet)

WEAPON: +0 (machete)

THE STEALTHY APPROACH

Alternately, the group can try to sneak in, bypassing a confrontation with the brothers. The best time to try this occurs when the surprisingly inseparable brothers leave the shop. It hums twenty-four hours a day, with workers pulling one of two twelve-hour shifts. The brothers have Alertness Modifiers of +2 (+1 if the team has yet to meet them, because they're not yet on their guard). For their part, the embroiderers dutifully never see what else happens in the factory, and have Alertness Modifiers of -2. Even if the team fails its **Infiltration** test, workers note but ignore their presence.

The brothers don't keep regular hours. Wired on cocaine, they can show up to bully and terrorize their workers in the deep of the night or the heat of the day. To be sure they've gone, the group must stake out the factory. This requires a Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** test; on a failure, local toughs show up to shake them down, threatening to alert the Pongpas. Convincing the shakedown artists to beat it requires a 1-point **Negotiation** or 2-point **Intimidation** spend. Though more bark than bite, getting into a fight with them tips off the brothers, who come out to apply their superior game statistics to the situation. The number of toughs equals the size of the group, plus one.

NEIGHBORHOOD TOUGHS

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 4, Scuffling 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -2

STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

WEAPON: -1 (brass knuckles)

INSIDE THE SWEATSHOP

Whether they get in by stealth or by going through the brothers, the team finds the shop's basement level given over to a series of jury-rigged refrigeration units.

- ▶ **Architecture:** Whoever turned the contents of several hijacked refrigerated vehicles into this makeshift cooling room was a crazy genius. Genius because it works, crazy because none of the individual units can be turned off separately.

Only about a twentieth of the room's capacity is now being used. A few racks of blood vials still sit near one wall.

- ▶ **Evidence Collection:** But from the tiny droplets of blood, and the rust marks where other racks once stood, it used to be full. The bulk of the unit's contents must have already shipped.

Outside the sweatshop stands a rusted-out oil drum about one-quarter full of paper ash. This is where the brothers dutifully burned all of their packing slips and other documentation related to the Esoterror operation.

(core for "Vera Hampton") **Chemistry:** One fragment in particular might be recoverable after some time spent in a hastily jury-rigged lab back at the hotel. If treated, it turns out to be a bank transfer from Vera Hampton, giving her name and the address of her Washington-area office.

Both brothers would sooner take a beating than expose themselves to the retribution of the conspiracy by admitting anything.

(core for "Bangkok Chop Shop") **Evidence Collection:** However, by subduing elder brother Witthaya, agents can check out the contents of his bulging wallet. Along with a condom, a packet of coke, and a thick wad of 100 and 500 baht bills, they find a business card.

A bloody fingerprint marks the card, suggesting that Witthaya was handling it at the same time as the cargo he was gathering and storing. The card gives an address and phone number for a junkyard and automotive repair shop in Patpong, listing its proprietor as Chantawong. On the back of the card, in Thai script, Witthaya made a note to himself that translates as "only deal with Chantawong"

The group could well grab Witthaya's wallet by other means. Let any plausible method work.

TATTOO HUNT

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Assembling the Picture, Jerrod Peeples,

Vera Hampton

LEAD-OUT: Vera Hampton

With a copy of the tattoo design on hand, the team can begin the grinding legwork of contacting various ink parlors throughout North America — or beyond, for that matter. They have to search for tattoo parlors and call them to describe the design and the sort of person who might have gotten it. After following up with emailed images of the tattoo, they can get the parlors to pull credit card information. Some clients paid cash, but others are traceable. Describe this process as laborious to the characters without dragging it out so it actually becomes so to the players.

If asked, a couple of tattoo artists say that the recipients claimed they were getting them as part of the admission to a

super-exclusive party they won in a contest. At least one of them expresses misgivings about that story: "It felt like the guy was bullshitting me."

After many days, they get a few hits, for such tattoo customers as:

- ▶ Tony Carr, Glendale, AZ
- ▶ Sabrina Cohen, Ann Arbor, MI
- ▶ Retha Hedges, Newark, NJ
- ▶ Virgilio Blanco, San Antonio, TX
- ▶ Dante Berg, Los Angeles, CA
- ▶ Ronny Wisniewski, North Gulf Beach, FL
- ▶ Xan Yung, Portland, OR
- ▶ Kimberlee Clem, Charlotte, NC

Further legwork pulls up information about these people. With **Forensic Psychology**, patterns emerge. All are heavy Internet users with disposable income, or access to money they could steal or embezzle. Their online trail includes classic signs of misanthropy, aggression, and stunted empathy. Their postings and comments betray both an alienation from society and a desire to be led. Almost all are in their twenties. Frequently occurring common interests include the occult, the military, guns, music, drugs, and fringe culture. Many had brushes with the law, though not enough to restrict their movements.

In other words, perfect low-level Esoterror recruits.

Forensic Accounting: Because these individuals were found via their credit cards, their later movements can be tracked — but only to a point. All of them booked flights to various Pacific Rim cities at different times, with their arrivals occurring just days before the disappearance of flight SJ713. But after those arrivals, every single person's money trail goes completely cold.

A visit to a tattoo recipient's home leads to an encounter with an indifferent, bored, or worried family member — whatever you think offers the most unexpected or compelling interaction. A search of the person's apartment, house, or room in the family abode leads to a scrubbed computer. **Data Retrieval** allows the recovery of some but not all communications regarding the contest, including the tattoo design.

(core clue for "Vera Hampton") Although the email address has been spoofed, it can be traced to Vera Hampton's office.

ELLIS SHERMAN

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Assembling the Picture, Eichhorn Hunold

Verwaltung, Thirsty World, Jerrod Peeples

LEAD-OUTS: Vera Hampton, Thirsty World, Vial Behavior,

Bangkok Chop Shop, The Island

If they're following up the Ellis Sherman thread of the investigation after "Thirsty World," the team already suspects that his name somehow connects to the CIA.

Otherwise, **Research** turns up references to his name in such Global War on Terror hotspots as Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan. That sure smells like the CIA.

A character might have an intelligence background in her day job. If so, she can make the contacts necessary to arrange a meeting at Langley with the CIA officer responsible for covering Ellis' tracks. Otherwise the Ordo pulls the necessary strings, warning them that the person they'll be speaking to has not been cleared for any supernatural truths.

This is Jan Melfi, a smartly attired woman in her late thirties who declines to describe her exact role at Langley. Although her superiors have ordered her to cooperate with the team, that doesn't extend to supplying more information than the team asks her for:

- ▶ When she learned that a private detective hired by Thirsty World was looking for Ellis Sherman, she intervened to ensure that they dropped the matter.
- ▶ Ellis was a CIA operative until about four years ago.
- ▶ She assumed that Thirsty World was looking into operations that occurred before then.
- ▶ If she'd been alerted to the fact that he was still out in the third world using that name and claiming to be from an NGO, she'd instead have initiated an inquiry into whatever loose cannon activities he'd been drawn into since his retirement.
- ▶ She has no idea what he was up to, but it wasn't agency business.
- ▶ Ellis was a sharp, dedicated agent with exactly the ruthless streak needed to perform certain unpleasant duties.
- ▶ Jan can't believe that he'd go to the dark side. He might go off the reservation, but he wouldn't aid terrorists.
- ▶ He did however take it hard when his father died, leaving the care of his disabled brother, Gary, in his hands.
- ▶ At least he had the money to hire in-home care for poor Gary.
- ▶ Gary has cerebral palsy.
- ▶ Of course, "Ellis Sherman" was a cover identity.
- ▶ If he's still using that name, he's taking a calculated risk. He'll have plenty of IDs and field resources tied to it.
- ▶ In real life "Ellis Sherman" was Drew Watkins of Wolf Trap, VA.

For clarity, we're going to keep calling this character Ellis Sherman.

Known for the well-known performing arts venue of the same name, the capitol-region bedroom community of Wolf Trap radiates all the calm money can buy. The Watkins abode stands next to a wooded area at the end of a cul-de-sac.

No one answers the door. Its lock offers no impediment to the seasoned investigator.

Electronic Surveillance: The alarm system has been left unengaged.

Once inside, calls to any occupants go unanswered.

Forensic Psychology: Tasteful but anonymous décor suggests an orderly mind with limited emotional attachment to this place or its contents.

Two exceptions break the home's general neatness: a ground floor bedroom and a den beside it. Clothes and books litter the

bedroom floor. Pop culture memorabilia stuffs the shelving lining its walls.

Forensic Psychology: Though of adult size, the ultracasual clothing items still project a teenage style.

Game consoles and cartridges lie strewn on the floor of the den. A large TV dominates the room. More shelves contain more action figures and collectibles. A bowl of cheese doodles, crumpled packaging lying beside it, has spilled in the middle of the floor.

On a worn leather couch, a knitted afghan blanket covers a prone, immobile figure.

Forensic Pathology: The knotted musculature and bone structure of the dead man indicates that he had cerebral palsy.

This must be Gary.

Forensic Pathology: Bruising at the throat shows that the killer attempted to strangle the victim. Broken fingernails attest to Gary's struggle for life. Partway through, the murderer, clearly bigger and stronger than Gary, gave up his attempt at strangulation and then beat him to death. The killing wound was a blow to the back of the head. Its configuration matches the couch's wooden armrest. The killer must have held his head and bashed him into it. Blood spatter on the armrest affirms this reconstruction.

Forensic Psychology: The use of a blanket to cover the body signals a regretful murderer who still cares for the victim. It is most often seen in murders of family members. (1-point spend) If Ellis did this, which seems likely, he might have been trying to spare his brother from some much worse fate. This seems like an act of departure, which raises the questions: why was Ellis going away? And what coming event could he be trying to shield Gary from?

An un-ignited incendiary device has been stuck to the wall with hastily torn duct tape.

Explosive Devices: If it had gone off, the device would have burned down the house, likely obscuring the cause of Gary's death. The flawed installation of its timer points to someone trained in bomb construction, but rusty at the job and working in haste.

Cop Talk: As a CIA field operative, Ellis might have been taught bomb-making long ago, but probably relied on other specialists if he ever needed a bomb.

Evidence Collection: In the den's wastepaper basket, the investigator finds the remains of a shattered smartphone.

Forensic Anthropology: That's blood on the phone parts. (After a DNA test of the blood) It belongs to Gary.

Ballistics: The phone shattered when it hit the floor, then was further damaged by a hammer.

From this the group might infer that Gary dislodged Ellis' phone from his pocket during the struggle. When Ellis switched from strangling to beating, he got Gary's blood on the phone fragments. Well aware that it contained damning information, Ellis then further destroyed it.

Explosive Devices: No doubt he was counting on the fire from the incendiary to finish the job.



Data Retrieval gets some of the contents back. The team can tell that:

- ▶ (core for “Vera Hampton”) he had extensive email contacts with Vera Hampton, head of a viral marketing firm from Washington called Vivonics
- ▶ (core for “Bangkok Chop Shop”) he regularly phoned a man named Catchai Chantawong, proprietor of a garage and junkyard in Patpong
- ▶ (core for “Vial Behavior”) he was arranging for unidentified persons to smuggle biohazardous material into Nonthaburi, Thailand
- ▶ 2-point spend: (alternate for “The Island”) the phone’s photo folder contains multiple shots of a flat, largely featureless atoll in what look like tropical waters

BANGKOK CHOP SHOP

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Flight Simulators, Eichhorn Hunold Verwaltung, Jerrod Peeples, Ellis Sherman, Vial Behavior

LEAD-OUT: The Island

Catchai Chantawong’s auto junkyard and repair garage occupies a borderland at the edge of Bangkok’s Patpong red light district. A desiccated man in his late sixties who breathes with the aid of a portable oxygen tank, Chantawong tolerates no foolishness. He has survived as a Thai criminal for decades, with all the savvy and payoffs to cops that entails.

Only since the mid-2000s has he branched into black-market flight simulators. He doesn’t understand the tech, but sees the positive impact on his bottom line. His adult daughters, Ploy, Noon, and Sai, handle the computer and electronics end of things. Their tautly muscled, machete-wielding male cousins take apart cars, or people, as Catchai commands.

Semi-feral dogs wander the junkyard, ready to attack intruders. Include one more of them than there are investigators.

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: +1

STEALTH MODIFIER: +1

WEAPON: -1 (bite)

A 2-point **Natural History** spend and a credible explanation of what the agents are doing allow them to neutralize the threat of the dogs without having to fight and kill them.

A fight with the dogs alerts the Chantawong cousins. There are one fewer of them than there are investigators.

ABILITIES: Athletics 6, Health 7, Scuffling 6

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

STEALTH MODIFIER: -1

WEAPON: +0 (machete)

If engaged in conversation, Catchai tries to portray himself to the team as simply an honest seller of stolen vehicles.

Cop Talk: He probably hasn’t paid off the cops to look the other way on charges of abetting international terrorism. If the team assures him that they’re not looking to jam him up on that, he might decide that it will cost him less to cooperate than to resist.

Reassurance, in a situation in which the agents have some sort of upper hand over him, does indeed prompt him to give them access to the flight simulators, and to provide the following information in response to questions:

- ▶ He worked with a Belgian, Roel Govaerts. Govaerts sourced obsolete flight simulators and shipped them to Catchai’s shop.
- ▶ Catchai then refurbished them to modern standards, or modern enough. In every previous case, he then arranged for them to be shipped out of Thailand. Govaerts then took over again, getting them the rest of the way to his clients. Catchai told him that he never wanted to know who the clients were, and Govaerts never exposed him to unwanted information.
- ▶ Recently though Catchai took an extra risk. He wanted to throw his youngest daughter, Sai, a lavish wedding, and got greedy.
- ▶ So he agreed to let a group come to his garage to train on the simulators.
- ▶ He did this only after being assured that they wouldn’t look like terrorists. They weren’t Arabs, Persians, or Pakistanis; they were Singaporeans.

- ▶ The man making the arrangements was an American, Ellis Sherman. He gave Catchai the impression he was CIA, which gave him further confidence that this wouldn't blow back on him. It was some kind of counter-terrorism operation.
- ▶ So for several months, a group of Singaporeans has been coming here and using his black-market flight simulator.
- ▶ They left about a week ago. No one said where they were going, and Catchai certainly didn't ask.
- ▶ One of the Singaporeans asked Ploy to scrub sample routes from the simulator's memory. So he assumes they did that.

(core for "The Island") **Data Retrieval:** Although the route was erased from memory, the agent recovers it. The route they practiced took them from Phnom Penh to a set of coordinates in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

THE ISLAND

SCENE TYPE: Core

LEAD-INS: Ellis Sherman, Bangkok Chop Shop

LEAD-OUTS: Copter Assault, Undercover Entry

If the team has the coordinates (either from "Bangkok Chop Shop" or an event you improvised):

A character with **Natural History** recalls no island or anything at that spot. A check of the map confirms it.

But if they call in recent satellite imaging for that spot, they see that a tiny atoll has suddenly appeared there.

Natural History: But there's something not right about this atoll. Normally they form when changing ocean levels expose a coral reef above the waterline. A regular atoll would have formed very slowly; this one came suddenly into being. And there seems to be some other material along with the coral, giving it a greater surface area than it would ordinarily have. Also, there's a strange smudge in the satellite image, near the atoll's northernmost jutting point.

The latest satellite imaging of this spot occurred before flight SJ713 disappeared.

Given the attention the vanished plane has received, the Ordo can't immediately arrange a new satellite sweep without tipping off the uninitiated.

If the team has Ellis Sherman's photos of the tropical atoll (either from "Ellis Sherman" or an event you improvised):

Natural History: This looks like an atoll, but with some odd features.

- ▶ Normally they form when changing ocean levels expose a coral reef above the waterline. Some strange, black material fills in the surface in what otherwise would be a lagoon encircled by coral.

- ▶ The most useful shot is taken at night, and shows the surface of the atoll lit up by a row of generator-powered lights arranged on a rig like you might see at an outdoor performance.
- ▶ The moon and the stars in the background allow the agent to consult a historical celestial cartography tool to pinpoint a large area of the Pacific Ocean as the likely site of the photo.

The team can then call HQ for recent satellite sweeps of the area, pinpointing the atoll, as above.

The Ordo scrambles a jet to the agents to pick them up and take them, along with an SSF squad, to the island. If they go along with this suggestion, go to "Copter Assault." Alternately, if they have the tattoo design, the team might instead propose a stealth infiltration, in which they get their arms suitably inked and seek to join the other Esoterror recruits. Mr. Verity approves this plan if they propose it. Go to "Undercover Entry."

2-point **Occult Studies** spend: This gathering of Esoterror recruits from around the world suggests an enormous summoning underway on the island. During a summoning, creatures from the Outer Dark take on earthly substance as they cross the membrane. If they come through the membrane too quickly, they fail to fully form. The ODE-attracting crystals from that WaltzMaps case ("Geoslashers") could be useful in forcing it through the membrane too soon, and could kill whatever it is.

Getting the substance shipped to their present location delays the operation by half a day. During the mop-up phase, they learn that this cost the lives of an additional four passengers. They may, however, wind up deciding that it allowed them to save the other passengers.

COPTER ASSAULT

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-IN: The Island

LEAD-OUTS: Celebrants Attack, Fuselage Bacchanal, The Eater and the Eaten

Special Suppression Forces squad leader Paige Brotherson briefs the group at a commandeered base on the French Polynesian island of Uturoa. She projects a steroidal, more-macho-than-the-boys persona. Three copters will be going in — two SSF teams in the forward force, and the agents in a third copter. Their chopper will land once the jarheads have secured the scene.

Brotherson reacts with a drill sergeant's unamused authority if investigators balk at this plan. Though she strongly resists any efforts to change it, players may argue with sufficient tenacity or logic to require you to give in.

Suggest that one of the agents might want to pilot the copter. If no one has experience piloting a whirlybird, a 1-point **Driving** expenditure now means that they have had it all along. It never came up before, that's all. As a reward for keeping things moving, the character gets to keep the piloting experience permanently.

As the copters near the island, the agents feel an overpowering sense of anxiety. They must make Difficulty 4 Stability tests, against a possible loss of 4, merely for nearing it. The Emerging One senses them coming at it in such an obvious fashion and batters them with waves of inchoate fear.

Further, each agent must make a Difficulty 6 **Health** test or suffer a demoralizing physical reaction to the fear waves. On a failure with an even-numbered result, the character vomits uncontrollably. On an odd-numbered failure, characters lose control of their bowels.

Up ahead, gunfire flashes from within the copter squad leader Brotherson is riding in. (The team probably has no way of figuring this out, but one of her men has completely lost it and is shooting everyone inside, hallucinating that they're blood corpses.) The chopper spirals into the sea, falling to pieces on impact. Sharks converge on the wreckage.

Ballistics: The pilot must have taken a hit.

The second chopper remains in the air long enough to circle over the ocean. Then a strange cloud-like mass rises from the atoll to briefly envelop it. The chopper drops from the sky, crash landing on the atoll in a plume of flaming smoke.

If the agents got the plan changed, find a way of having the creature on the island immediately wipe out the SSF officers that better fits the circumstances.

Then another cloud-mass rises from the island to swat at their copter.

Ask the players whether their characters look into the mass or avert their eyes. Those looking at it see inside the mass to a collection of roiling demon faces tearing each other apart, reforming, and then tearing each other apart again.

If the pilot is a GMC, the agents see her bleeding from her eyes, screaming inarticulately.

A Difficulty 6 **Driving** test determines whether the team's copter also crashes into the atoll.

Add 1 to the Difficulty for each of the following factors that apply:

- ▶ The pilot's seat is presently occupied by a blinded, screaming GMC.
- ▶ The agent making the attempt hasn't been established as having copter experience.
- ▶ The agent making the attempt is trying not to look at the cloud.

On a success, the agent brings the copter in for a safe landing. Although many of the Esoterror celebrants gathered on the island remain in a dissociated state and pay no attention to them, some rouse themselves from their mental fog and attack the intruders. See the "Celebrants Attack" Antagonist Reaction scene, coming up.

On a failure, the copter makes a crash landing but remains intact. Each character aboard makes an **Athletics** test with a base Difficulty of 4. Add the difference between Difficulty and result on the previous **Driving** test to this Difficulty. Those failing take a die of damage +1. Those succeeding lose 1 Health.

Crashing the copter brings one consoling side benefit: the still-intact whirling blades give the group cover to fan out and momentarily escape the Esoterrorists who would otherwise be converging on them.

Nonetheless, this entrance blows their cover. They probably initiate the events of "The Eater and the Eaten" without much further investigation.

UNDERCOVER ENTRY

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-IN: The Island

LEAD-OUTS: Celebrants Attack, Fuselage Bacchanal, The Eater and the Eaten

This scene occurs if the agents decide to try to get on the island quietly, posing as Esoterrorists. For this to have any chance of working, they must all get the tattoo (p. 87) inked onto their arms. If they use the special photo-active ink they might have acquired from Zach Moreno during "Coulrophobia," they gain an advantage.

They have to decide what vehicle to use to get to the atoll. The less prepossessing, the better. They might show up in a motorized dinghy, some other small watercraft, or on a small plane or helicopter. Aerial vehicles have to look shabby enough to pass muster as something Esoterror wannabes could have scrounged up after missing a planned rendezvous. The sleek copters fielded by the SSF give the game away.

When the agents arrive, a pair of Esoterror guards approaches them to ask to see their credentials. The agents must show their tattoos, and explain why they showed up here alone.

The guards carry UV lights, under which the tattoos are supposed to fluoresce. However, if they don't, these gatekeepers sigh in annoyance. Several of the other celebrants screwed up and did not follow the instructions needed to get the ink. Though the guards call the agents typical careless idiots, this omission alone does not arouse their suspicions.

On the other hand, if the tattoos do light up, they immediately accept the team without further questioning.

Forensic Psychology: Some force has impaired the guards' brain function, putting them in a semi-trance state.

Impersonate or a 1-point **Reassurance** spend convinces the guards that any halfway credible explanation for the team's late arrival makes sense. They urge the group to report to the fuselage for briefing, and watch to make sure they go. This takes them to "Fuselage Bacchanal."

On a Difficulty 4 **Infiltration** test, group members can edge away from the guards to immediately confront the horrors of "The Eater and the Eaten."

If this test fails, *and* the group's tattoos didn't glow under UV light, the guards pull their Glocks and open fire. Attacking celebrants (immediately below) show up as reinforcements, unless the investigators succeed in dropping the guards silently and in a single round.

Having physically overcome the guards, the team can then move on to either “Fuselage Bacchanal” or “The Eater and the Eaten.”

GUARDS

ABILITIES: Athletics 8, Health 8, Scuffling 8, Shooting 8

HIT THRESHOLD: 4

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -1

STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

WEAPON: -1 (combat baton), +0 (pistol)

If a later scene requires extra bad guy firepower, the guards might show up to start blasting away. Even if they take out these guys, you can rationalize the appearance of additional well-armed guardians. Keep them as a supplemental threat, though.

CELEBRANTS ATTACK

SCENE TYPE: Antagonist Reaction

LEAD-INS: Copter Assault, Undercover Entry,
Fuselage Bacchanal

LEAD-OUTS: Fuselage Bacchanal, The Eater and the Eaten

When they see the agents doing things that seem counter to the spirit of their summoning, the recruits lured to the island by the Vivonics viral marketing campaign react variously. Most remain in their ecstatic state, watching in dazed, psychotropic fascination as if they’re watching performance art at Burning Man. Others successfully identify the team as disruptive to their party, but can’t muster the will or motor control to attack. A small fraction summon the wherewithal to pick up rocks or draw knives they brought with them to the island. They swarm at the agents, intent on murdering them. Sometimes, when one goes down, a dazed celebrant jolts from reverie to join the attacking mob.

CELEBRANTS

ABILITIES: Athletics 4, Health 1, Scuffling 4

HIT THRESHOLD: 3

ALERTNESS MODIFIER: -2

STEALTH MODIFIER: -2

WEAPON: -1 (rock)

Start with two more celebrants than there are agents. When an agent takes out a celebrant, roll a die. On an odd result, another celebrant watching from the sidelines lights up, achieves clarity, and rushes over to join the fray. Otherwise no one replaces him.

A safe landing in “Copter Assault” sets off the celebrants. Otherwise, use them when the agents give themselves away or make their first aggressive move.

If story logic demands it, agents may provoke more than one celebrant attack. Look for a way to make the second one distinct from the first, and not just a boring rehash.

FUSELAGE BACCHANAL

SCENE TYPE: Alternate

LEAD-INS: Copter Attack, Undercover Entry,
Celebrants Attack

LEAD-OUTS: Celebrants Attack, The Eater and the Eaten

In this scene the group can gain the information putting the climax in context.

The Esoterror recruits from all around the world gather either inside the fuselage or party alongside it. Speaker towers near the wings blast pumping electronic dance music. Celebrants dip red fiesta cups into a nasty-looking oil drum full of crimson punch.

Forensic Pathology: Their jagged gait and gross motor impairment suggest something else working on them other than mere alcohol.

Chemistry: The punch itself consists of grain alcohol plus a powdered drink mix. Circumstances aside, there’s nothing weird about it.

Unless the team does something egregious to seem like the cops, the celebrants here assume they’re supposed to be here. They may appear momentarily inquisitive if the agents lack tattoos, but accept pretty much any explanation the PCs supply.

Here the group might meet surviving Esoterror affiliates from past cases, for example Maria Alcaine (p. 45) or Zach Moreno (p. 18). Absent a reminder, the baleful psychic radiation of the Emerging One dulls their recollections; they fail to place the team members. Here agents could otherwise (or also) meet tattoo recipients whose names they uncovered in “Tattoo Hunt.”

Some of the celebrants seem more sober and attentive than others. An agent might choose to approach one to get instructions. A broad-shouldered woman with dirty blonde dreadlocks, Lorena Aanderaa, serves as apparent traffic captain. In response to questions, she supplies the following information:

- ▶ Organization has gone to hell, but it doesn’t seem to matter.
- ▶ The Emerging One gets into your head, makes it hard to think.
- ▶ But all you have to do, when you hear the Trumpet Blast From Beyond, is go into the fuselage, untie one of the passengers, and drag them down to the end of the island where the Great Manifestation is occurring.
- ▶ Be sure to inject them with numinous blood at the injection station.
- ▶ The syringes in this collection of generator-powered small refrigeration units contain blood harvested from victims of past ODE encounters. It shows the Emerging One who the sacrifices are, so it doesn’t eat its servants.
- ▶ Those who prove worthy will become Elder Demons of the new order. (Lorena clearly assumes she falls into that category.)
- ▶ Those who are judged useless will eventually be devoured, even if they’re free of numinous blood. But that won’t happen until the supply of passengers runs out.
- ▶ If you see passengers trying to escape, round them up again and retie them to their seats.



- ▶ If you see someone else has already started taking a hostage to the Great Manifestation, wait your turn till next time.
- ▶ Like a normal organism, the Emerging One can only digest so much at one time. It can't consume more than one or two passengers per Trumpet Blast.
- ▶ When you take a passenger to it, the Emerging One leaves bits of the victim behind. Feel free to wear these on your person as signals of your worthiness.
- ▶ You can do whatever you want to the passengers, so long as you don't lower their nutrient value.

Other celebrants wander about as if enjoying a good party. Some filter in and out of the fuselage. Ropes hanging from the front entry doors behind the cockpit allow them to get in and out.

Inside the fuselage, the team sees a hundred or so terrified passengers duct-taped or tied to their seats. The many empty seats suggest that the others have already been sacrificed. Assuming that they're with the Esoterrorists, the passengers flinch from team members.

Depending on how graphic you want this scene to be, you might describe celebrants in the fuselage as actively performing vile acts on their captives. For many groups you'll want to leave this to the imagination. However you depict their depredations, their presence prevents the team from openly reassuring passengers that they're here to help.

When the players run out of stuff they want their characters to do in this scene, a horrible screeching sound shudders the island. Hearing it requires a Difficulty 7 Stability test against a possible loss of 4.

If a player immediately reacts to this by untying a passenger to lead him or her away, the group can head to "The Eater and the Eaten" with a reason to enter the area.

Otherwise another celebrant leaps into action, cutting up the duct tape that traps a trembling Vietnamese man in his late sixties, and hauls him to the fuselage door. He tosses the man out and then shinnies down the rope.

The agents might follow him, or hang back and continue to poke around.

THE EATER AND THE EATEN

SCENE TYPE: Climax

LEAD-INS: Copter Assault, Undercover Entry, Celebrants Attack, Fuselage Bacchanal

Either on their own, or posing as Esoterror recruits with a trembling, screaming prisoner in tow, the agents start to make out a giant rent in reality at the end of the island. Through it they can glimpse what can only be the Outer Dark. Seeing it requires a Difficulty 8 Stability test against a possible loss of 6.

Inside the tear in space, an amorphous, rippling entity forms. About the size of the jetliner, it sprouts and then reabsorbs various appendages: tentacles, tendrils, saw-toothed insect arms, flowing polyps. Dozens of gigantic, distorted faces, each expressing a different flavor of agony, appear like buboes along its shapeless bulk. Each reminds the team of a person, evil or innocent, who died at some point during the entire Worldbreaker investigation.

This is the Emerging One.

Between them and it stands Ellis Sherman, his flak jacket festooned with the discarded body parts of passengers the Emerging One has already devoured. He has ears and noses on his bandanna, strips of flesh hanging from his pockets, and eyeballs stuck with small stainless steel cooking skewers to his floppy canvas sun hat.

Whether or not they met him back in “Heart of Outer Darkness,” he clocks them immediately as Ordo operatives. Confident of ultimate victory, he’s happy to insanely tell the team exactly why their efforts will prove fruitless. In addition to any answers they might otherwise have gotten from Lorena, he reveals the following.

- ▶ The Emerging One is the largest Outer Dark Entity ever to form on Earth.
- ▶ When it completes its birthing cycle, this already gigantic tear in the membrane will rip right open, allowing every demon within to flood the world. The wall between realities will become a thing of the past.
- ▶ Ellis tells the other fools that they’ll be kings or some such nonsense. Really they’ll just all be eaten, and so will he. The world is shit, and it’s time it was destroyed. He’s ready to die, so long as he can take everyone else with him.
- ▶ The island is itself an extrusion of Outer Darkness energy into the ordinary world. The anxiety caused by the previous four cases helped to bring it into solid being.
- ▶ It was the Emerging One who first contacted Marshall Powell. It started the plan; Ellis can only claim to be its final servitor.

Ellis doesn’t fear for the Emerging One’s safety. He does nothing to stop the team from approaching the manifestation. Nor does he defend himself against them. If they take him prisoner, he laughs maniacally. If they shoot him, he dies giggling that he’s already won.

Immediately attacking the Emerging One directly proves useless. If attacked, the creature juts out an appendage, which impales the investigator with the lowest Athletics pool. The agent then explodes in a shower of blood, bone, and muscle. Seeing this happen requires the survivors to make Difficulty 5 Stability tests against a possible loss of 7.

Having done this, the Emerging One seems to lapse into a torpor, as if digesting devoured life energy. This less active state lasts for 15 minutes for each of the slain character’s Health points, or until the team attacks it again.

Otherwise, the creature pays them no heed.

Of the possible plans the team might come up with to end the threat, ones that will definitely work include:

- ▶ Using the crystals from “Geoslashers” to draw the Emerging One from the rent in the membrane, causing it to dissipate prematurely, because it hasn’t eaten enough passengers to yet gain full form. By “dissipate,” naturally we mean “explode in a shower of ichor.”
- ▶ Calling in a drone strike. This kills everyone on the island, including all the investigators. But this enormous sacrifice saves the world.
- ▶ Call in more SSF copters to extract the remaining passengers, while distracting the creature’s attention so it doesn’t knock them out of the sky on approach. Distracting its attention means attacking it and getting destroyed, as above. But if timed and coordinated just so, the sacrifice gives the SSF teams exactly the time they need, leaving one PC survivor left to attend the debriefing.

Plans that we haven’t thought of, but seem to you like they ought to work, do. Extend them with suspenseful moments in which the fate of all hangs in the balance.

VEIL-OUT

SCENE TYPE: Denouement

With such a high-profile incident, a specialist team from Ordo HQ takes over, relieving any survivors of Veil-Out planning duty. All the passengers have gone irretrievably insane and are installed in a luxurious psychiatric facility to while away the rest of their days. Esoterror recruits fit the same bill but get sent to a barebones institution. Aviation officials stage a press conference announcing the sighting of the jet’s wreckage in the deep ocean. Everyone aboard, they say, clearly died on impact.

APPENDIX: NIGHT'S BLACK AGENTS HACK

WITH EXTENSIVE ADAPTATION YOU COULD USE *WORLDBREAKER* AS THE basis for a *Night's Black Agents* campaign. Although a raft of details require modification, the main changes you'll need to make are:

- a) more chasing
- b) new goals for the villains

Your *NBA* agents stumble across the video of the sex club murders, or the murder scene itself. This happens as part of the instigating event in which they get burned in the first place, or during a series already in progress. The vampires behind it all immediately discover that the agents possess both this evidence and the wherewithal to eventually understand it. So they send waves of strike teams to zero them out. This introduces the pursuit thriller element that *NBA* thrives on.

Because *Night's Black Agents* lets you pick the traits of your key vampires, no one set of replacement goals will work for all GMs. Our example assumes supernatural vampires capable of working ritual magic and who fear sunlight, as per tradition. If you've chosen alien vampires who explode in freezing temperatures, you'll need an alternate take.

In this version, the ritual on the island in "Swallowed" seeks to bring on an eternal cloud cover across the globe. Once conjured, it will allow vampires to move about at will during the daytime, changing everything.

As wet-working field assets, you could stick with the symps, portraying them as manifestations of vampiric necromancy. Alternately, the Powells might inject their chosen pawns with blood-filled syringes. This specially charged blood allows distant vampires to puppet the hosts from afar.

Over the course of the four preliminary cases, the PCs discover preparations for a new nocturnal order. They uncover:

- ▶ hydroponic facilities in which food will be grown to sustain the prey population.
- ▶ protocols to officialize the new worldwide vampirocracy.
- ▶ a secret security apparatus, ready to spring into action to enforce it.

To work the big magic of "Swallowed," the vampires must first conduct preliminary summonings, bringing rare or expunged bloodsucker types back into the world.

The gigglers of "Coulrophobia" are vampires formed from the fears of children, and those who still retain their childhood terrors.

The cavelings of "New Crystal Maiden" become nosferatu-style vamps with a Mayan twist.

In "Heart of Outer Darkness," Ellis Sherman tries to summon a forgotten strain of plague vampires. Here the Ebola grenades and dirty bombs are meant to turn the people of Gwoza into a mass sacrifice. Portray the Colonel as an ancient vampire lord, capable of world-spanning sorceries.

Breaking somewhat from the pattern, the murders of "Geoslashers" gather necromantic energy needed for the big working. They signal to isolated vampires and their Renfields that the time of the great change draws near.

Fear Itself

The Roleplaying Game of Personal Horror

Fear Itself 2nd Edition plunges ordinary people into a disturbing contemporary world of madness and violence — and inexorably draws them into confrontation with creatures of the Outer Black, a realm of alien menace. GMs can re-create all the shudders and shocks of the horror genre at their table, whether they use the game's distinctive mythology or one of their own choosing.

Powered by the GUMSHOE investigative roleplaying system, *Fear Itself* is ideal for one-shot horror games (where few, if any, of the protagonists are expected to survive), or ongoing campaigns in which the characters gradually discover more about the disturbing supernatural reality that hides in the shadows of the ordinary world. Will they learn how to combat the darkness? Or spiral tragically into insanity and death?

This expanded edition supports multiple different types of play, from bloody one-shots to extended investigative campaigns. Its updated rules draw from more than ten years of GUMSHOE development and play experience, to deliver the ultimate in personal horror roleplaying.

Fear Itself 2nd Ed. includes three sample scenarios, from a one-night adventure through a mini-series, to a full campaign:

The Circle: An experimental drug trial goes horribly wrong when one of your fellow participants disappears. Figure out what happened to him, or you're next.

Glass Beach Summer: The storm changed everything. We went home, one by one. And then we started to see them. We saw the monsters. At first, we thought the storm had brought them. It was only later that we learned the truth. The storm changed only us. The monsters were always there.

The Dispatchers: No backup. No assistance. Just a voice on the radio in the night, asking you for help. In this campaign, unlikely monster hunters are drawn together by the mysterious signal. Can they survive their missions long enough to save themselves?



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