

2ND EDITION

Fear Itself

A horror game powered by the GUMSHOE system

By **Robin D Laws** and **Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan**

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Fear Itself

***Fear Itself* and other GUMSHOE horror games**

Fear Itself adapts the GUMSHOE rules system originally presented in *The Esoterrists*. They both share the background of Creatures of Unremitting Horror trying to break through the Membrane (see p. 6), which is all that separates our world from their domain – the Outer Dark (p. 6). While *Fear Itself* pits ordinary people against these antagonists, player characters in *The Esoterrists* are ultracompetent operatives, supported by a well-resourced international organization (the Ordo Veritatis) in their fight against the eponymous human conspiracy that abets the Creatures' entrance into our world.

The GUMSHOE rules are also used in the supernatural horror games *Night's Black Agents* (in which burned-out spies uncover vampiric conspiracies) and *Trail of Cthulhu* (a reworking of the classic *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos).

Fear Itself's 2nd Edition refactors the original text, expanding on the differences between one-shot and campaign play and adding more support for different ways to play. It presents a variety of tools and techniques for the GM to use while pursuing the ghastly thrill of unremitting horror.

FEAR ITSELF

Fear Itself plunges ordinary people into a disturbing contemporary world of madness and violence. Players take the role of regular folk much like themselves, who are inexorably drawn into a confrontation with an unearthly realm of alien menace. GMs can use it to replicate the shudders and shocks of the horror genre in both film and literature.

Fear Itself serves as an ideal platform for one-shot games in which, like any self-respecting horror flick, few if any of the protagonists are expected to survive the climax. It can also be employed to run ongoing or even open-ended campaigns in which the leading characters gradually discover more about the disturbing supernatural reality hiding in the shadows of the ordinary world. Over time, they grow more adept at combating these threats – or spiral tragically into insanity and death.

HOW TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING WORKS

A roleplaying game is a shared exploration of a fictional situation. One participant, the Game Moderator (GM), describes what's happening. The other participants, the players, play characters in that setting and decide what their characters do in response to challenges and mysteries posed by the GM. There's much, much more to it, but that's the basic idea: the GM describes the current situation, the players describe what their characters do about it, and the GM uses the rules in this book to work out whether or not they succeed.

Fear Itself

USING THIS BOOK

All *Fear Itself* games use the same core rules, presented in Chapter 4.

- Game Moderators (GMs) should read Chapters 5 and 6, discussing how to design and run a mystery.
- Players should read Chapters 1, 2, and 3, which contain advice and rules for creating characters.
- Chapters 7 (Creatures of Unremitting Horror) and 8 (Psychic Powers) should be referenced as needed — not every game will involve either psychic powers or monsters.
- Chapter 9 is all about one-shots; Chapter 10 is a sample one-shot adventure.
- Chapter 11 is all about limited-session miniseries; Chapter 12 is a sample miniseries.
- Chapter 13 discusses open-ended campaigns; Chapter 14 is a sample campaign.

So, if you're a...

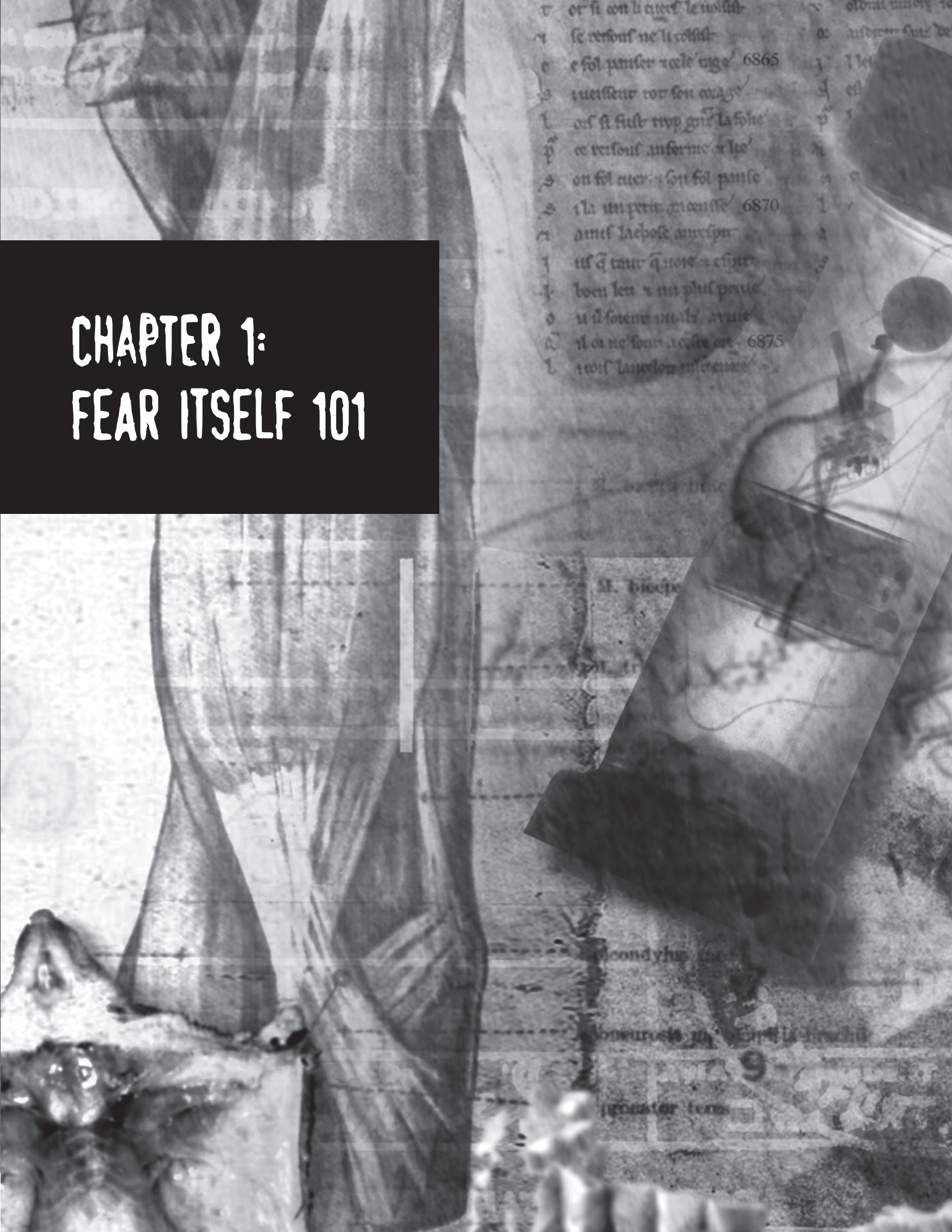
The Outer Dark

The default supernatural threat in *Fear Itself 2nd Edition* is the Outer Dark, a dimension of horror and suffering inhabited by ghastly Creatures of Unremitting Horror. The Outer Dark is separated from our reality by a thin and fraying Membrane; monsters and psychic effluvia seep through gaps in this Membrane, resulting in supernatural horror. The Membrane is especially weak in places where hopelessness and suffering hold sway; cultists and lunatics seek to manipulate such conditions, or find other occult ways of breaching the divide and releasing their monstrous patrons into our world.

You don't have to use the Outer Dark mythology in your games, but it's ideally suited for stories of grisly terror and urban decay.

PLAYER	GAME MODERATOR RUNNING . . .		
	A ONE-SHOT...	A MINISERIES...	A LONG CAMPAIGN
READ			
1. GUMSHOE 101 2. Creating Characters 3. Tips for Players (Ask your GM if you should look at 8. Psychic Powers)	4. Basic Rules 5. Designing a Mystery 6. Running a Mystery 7. Creatures of Unremitting Horror 9. One-Shots	4. Basic Rules 5. Designing a Mystery 6. Running a Mystery 7. Creatures of Unremitting Horror 11. Miniseries	4. Basic Rules 5. Designing a Mystery 6. Running a Mystery 7. Creatures of Unremitting Horror 13. Campaigns
AND CHECK OUT...			
	10. The Circle	12. Glass Beach Summer	14. The Dispatchers

CHAPTER 1: FEAR ITSELF 101



or si con li cures le uolist
le reusouf ne li colist
e fol panser cele uige 6865
meilleur tot son corage
L oel si fust trop grant la folie
p ce reusouf auferme a lie
s on fol cuer a son fol panser
s i la un petit meusse 6870
a ames lachose auferme
I us q taur q uote a esur
I boen leu a un plus prauce
o u il soient un ilz auue
a il oi ne font a cele ore 6875
L uis lancelez auferme

M. Diocle

condyhus

neuroch

gonator

9

In *Fear Itself*, you're playing an ordinary person who's about to be drawn into a mystery, or plunged into a horrific situation. If you're going to survive, you'll need to understand how the game works.

The three key sections of your character sheet are your **Investigative Abilities**, your **General Abilities**, and your **Risk Factors**.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

Investigative Abilities are how you find clues. GUMSHOE is all about acquiring and using information, and Investigative Abilities let you find information. They're divided into three categories — Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical — but they all work the same way.

You never need to roll dice for these abilities — **if you've got the right ability for the current situation, you'll get a clue.** Say you're looking around a library. If you point out to the GM that you're using your **Research** ability, you'll find any Research-related information automatically. You'll never fail to find information because you rolled badly — you just need to ask the right questions and roleplay the right actions.

If you have allocated character points in an Investigative Ability, you've got a rating in it, and you can find clues related to that topic. You never need to spend points to get key (or "core") clues. Instead, you **spend points for advantages** like extra information, bonus General Ability points, or story twists. Your GM will suggest opportunities to spend points; you can also suggest possible benefits for spending Investigative points.

Spending points from an Investigative Ability does not prevent you from using that ability to find clues.

GENERAL ABILITIES

General Abilities are how you get things done. They're how you actually use the information you gained with your Investigative Abilities.

You have to roll for General Abilities. GUMSHOE uses a **standard six-sided die**, and you usually need to **roll a 4 or higher** (the GM gets to secretly pick the Difficulty you need to beat). You can **spend points** from the appropriate General Ability to boost your chances before rolling; **every point spent gives you a +1 to the roll.** So, if you're trying to use Hiding to hide from a monster, you could just take your chances by rolling the die, or spend 3 points to be certain of getting at least a 4.

Two General Abilities work differently from the rest — your **Health** and your **Stability**. These measure your character's physical and psychological integrity. As long as you've got a positive value in these abilities, you're OK. If damage or stress takes your **Health or Stability below 0**, you're in trouble. If you go **below -5** in either ability, you're in big trouble. You can regain Health with the Medic ability, and regain Stability with Shrink.

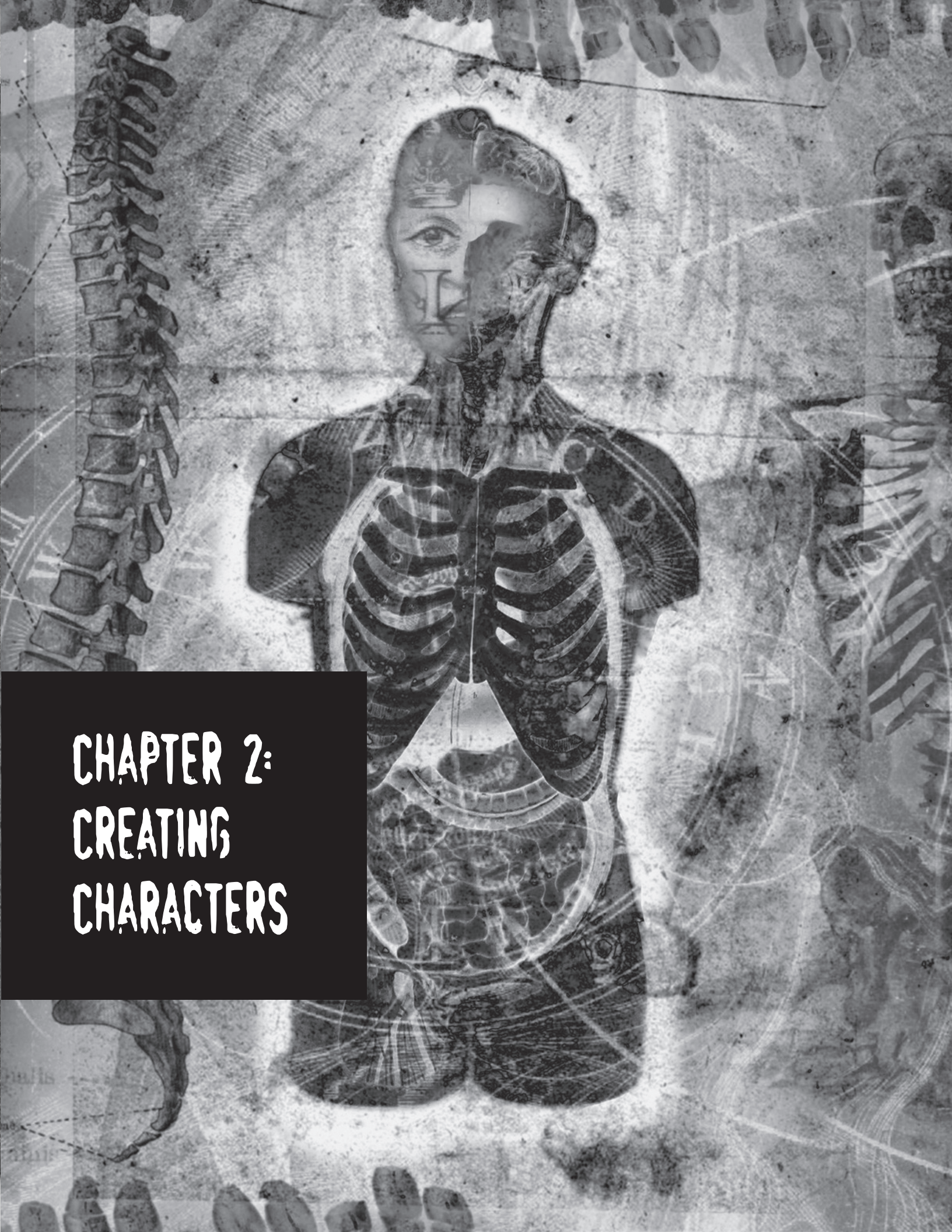
RISK FACTORS

Risk Factors are why you can't run away. The particular Risk Factors used depend on the game you're playing, and the GM will tell you what they are. All Risk Factors have two things in common. First, **they draw you into the mystery.** Maybe you're looking for your lost brother. Maybe you're trying to free yourself from recurring nightmares. Maybe you're searching for redemption.

Second, **ignoring Risk Factors hurts.** If you go against a Risk Factor — say you decide not to go into the abandoned mine to look for your missing brother, even though you found a clue pointing there — then you lose Stability.

So, embrace the risk. Follow the clues. And pray you survive the horrors that await you.

You have nothing to fear but... *Fear Itself*.



**CHAPTER 2:
CREATING
CHARACTERS**

Fear Itself

Fear Itself characters begin play as ordinary people, unaware of the presence of supernatural forces in their world. They're people like the players, from normal walks of life. Their backgrounds may slightly prepare them for confrontations with danger, but such experience may only lend them the overconfidence needed to walk headfirst into the shredder.

THE SETUP

You may be playing a single-session one-shot game, or a multi-session miniseries, or settling in for a long, open-ended campaign. While the rules governing character creation are the same in all three styles of play, there are different Risk Factors and group dynamics if you're playing a one-shot or a longer game. There's advice for the GM on this topic on page 12. If you're a player, the GM will advise you on what's needed.

THE PREMISE

Your GM will probably present you with a series premise to use as a springboard in character creation. If not, then discuss with your GM and the other players what sort of premise you'll all be working from. The premise explains what the characters have in common, and requires you to create your character within certain boundaries.

Example premises might include:

- You're all students at the same high school
- You're regulars at a hipster coffee shop in a bohemian neighborhood
- You're passengers on a cruise ship
- You're former members of the same army unit
- You're clients and staff members at an upscale psychiatric institution

Even if the premise is exotic or fantastical, your character is still going to be someone ordinary. If the game's set on a distant colony world hundreds of light-years from Earth, your player character (PC) isn't going to be a square-jawed space captain or armored marine — you're going to be a crew member on a broken-down space freighter, or a colonist trying to scrape a living.

Whatever the premise, your character is not allowed to be prepared for what's about to happen.

THE CONCEPT

The first step in character creation is to choose a **concept**. The best concepts are quick and punchy, consisting of an adjective and a noun. The noun tells you who the character is at first glance, while the adjective modifies it with additional detail. Unexpected combinations can lead to compelling, distinctive characters.

Example concepts:

surly secretary, manic party animal, standoffish rocker, ethereal copy shop clerk, intense comic-book collector, stolid reporter, nervous actor, depressed accountant, drunken writer, condescending office manager, arrogant salesperson, fast-talking dog trainer, loutish seminarian, cheerful bartender, blissful slacker, good-looking gambler, extroverted scientist, alienated cabbie.

Unless the GM tells you otherwise, assume that the game takes place in a realistic version of the world as we know it. If you suggest that your cruise ship passenger is a ninja assassin from the Ninety-Nine Killer Army, be prepared to be reminded that modern-day ninja assassins are purely fanciful characters.

Should the GM find that your proposed concept doesn't quite fit, she'll work with you to preserve the basic sort of character you want to play, while still conforming to her overall framework for the series.

If possible, create your character at the same time as the other players, so you can riff on each others' concepts and start sketching your backstories and connections.

Character Creation Quick Reference

- Taking into account the setup and premise, create your concept.
- Choose a Risk Factor based on the setup and premise.
- Buy abilities.
- Specify Sources of Stability.

RESTRICTIONS ON CONCEPTS

When a GM announces the start of a straight-up horror game, there are certain character types nearly every player gravitates toward. However, if everybody plays one of these types, the group composition becomes skewed, warping the feel of the game so that it no longer resembles a typical horror story.

In *Fear Itself*, the GM may prevent this by imposing quotas, so that only one player per group may choose each of the coveted character types. Players decide between themselves, by whatever means of negotiation they desire, who gets to play them. Wise groups will ensure that their combat specialist is played by a member with a good attendance record.

Commonly restricted types are:

- **Combat/investigation expert.** This catchall includes police officers, military veterans, karate champions, private eyes, and any other type with a similar skill set. When in doubt as to whether a character falls into this ever-popular category, GMs are enjoined to judge ruthlessly. This is usually a single character — not one combat expert and a separate investigation specialist.
- **Psychic.** For more on psychic powers, see p. 71.
- **Occult expert.** The default assumption in *Fear Itself* is that characters are unaware of the existence of the supernatural until they encounter it for themselves. The GM may permit one character to have some measure of genuine occult knowledge — a priest, academic, book dealer, weird neighbor, village witch, vagabond demon hunter, or (in a crossover with *The Esoterrorists*) a burned-out or maimed ex-Ordo Veritatis (see p. 5) agent.

What's more, such characters are usually fumbling, resource-starved exponents of their type. Characters must lack not only innate ability, but also opportunity to call on powerful patrons or organizations for help. Players choosing such characters must explain why they lack the full wherewithal otherwise indicated by their background. The most obvious option is to make the character young and unseasoned. Players can make their combat/investigation experts army trainees, police academy cadets, or apprentice investigators working for their P.I. uncles on weekends. Or you can go to the other end of the age spectrum and create infirm and forgetful retirees. Alternatively, the characters may be

mere self-taught wannabes, or washouts, cashiered for skeevey behavior.

GMs should warn players wanting to play the combat/investigation character that they're picking an especially fragile character type. The horror genre tends toward an intensely skeptical view of authority figures. If the authorities were any good, they'd be able to rescue you from the creeping things up in the abandoned house. Instead, they're never there when you need them, or are slaughtered with near-comic efficiency as soon as they appear. (The enduring example of the ineffectual authority figure in horror is Martin Balsam as the detective who goes snooping into the Bates residence in *Psycho*.)

Likewise, psychic characters are in some way vulnerable or weak. They are most likely experiencing their powers for the first time. Alternatively, they might have spent years blocking out their abilities after an initial run-in with the Outer Dark, or could be returning to sanity after a lengthy psychotic break. At any rate, they'll be isolated from other psychics — if any others even exist in the GM's world.

Also like combat types, psychics are especially fragile. While authority figures are often the first to get killed, psychics get priority seating in the rubber room. Their unearthly perceptions allow them to see more than ordinary people, and in a place stalked by unremitting horror, that's a bad thing indeed. GMs should warn would-be psychics of the inherent hazards of their character choice.

Occult experts tend to be untrustworthy, physically weak, or already compromised by their connection to the supernatural. They've already lost their innocence and virtue by dabbling in the occult, so there are no genre prohibitions about killing them off. Often, the occult expert is the mentor who must die so the real hero can stand alone against the monsters.

GMs wanting to emphasize the contrast between mundane characters and supernatural evil are free to disallow psychic and occult expert characters altogether. They may be especially inclined to do so when replicating the non-supernatural slasher subgenre, typified by *Hostel*, *The Devil's Rejects*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

No group is obligated to include either a psychic, occult expert, or a combat/

Fear Itself

investigation expert. Nor, for that matter, is the GM obliged to set quotas. Obviously, if the premise is “you’re all playing FBI investigators who specialize in weird events and serial killings” or “you’re all members of the same family, and all share the same supernatural curse that gives you terrifying, unwanted powers”, then quotas aren’t appropriate.

RISK FACTORS

One recurring question bedevils any plotter of horror stories: *Why don't they just run away?* When you, as the audience, identify with characters in jeopardy, you desperately want them to get out of danger. But the characters can't get out of danger, or your horror tale is over.

However, because plot arises out of character, GMs need to enlist their players' help in giving the PCs good reason to go down into that dark basement, even when all external logic cries otherwise.

During character creation, after arriving at the concept, each player determines their character's **Risk Factors**. This is a basic component of the character's psyche that motivates them to risk horrific encounters. When presented with a situation that triggers the Risk Factor, the character is obligated to plunge deeper into jeopardy, or suffer a loss of Stability — see p. 50.

Fear Itself 2nd Edition suggests different Risk Factors for different game setups. If you're playing a one-shot, you need something quick and easy that pushes you into that dark basement. If you're playing a long campaign, you need a reason to return to that dark basement again and again.

Ask your GM which Risk Factors are in use in this

The Ballet of the Reluctant Hero

Most roleplaying games don't need to use Risk Factors, because player characters in those games are heroes. No one needs to ask why the barbarian warrior goes down into the dungeon, or the space explorer travels to the stars, or even why the Ordo Veritatis (see p. 5) agent battles the horrors of the Outer Dark. These characters are all by definition extraordinary people, inhumanly brave and determined.

Fear Itself characters are ordinary people. Flawed, fearful people. Both players and GM want the characters to be mundane and unheroic; both players and GM want the characters to actually investigate the mystery and play the game, instead of running away. *Fear Itself* play is sometimes like a formalized dance — first the player says “OK, I'm going to do what a normal person would do, and run like hell,” and in response the GM brings up a suitable Risk Factor to justify the character being heroic. Then the roles reverse, and the GM's the one trying to drive the PC away from the mystery by pointing out how foolish their heroism is, while the player is now the one pushing forward into the horror, declaring that this is something they have to do.

In short, part of the fun of *Fear Itself* is putting your characters through an emotional wringer at the same time as you solve the mystery.

game. Each Risk Factor is described in the chapter about the style of game it's most suitable for, but your GM can mix and match them as desired.

ONE-SHOTS (P. 100):

- **Pregenerated Characters:** The GM creates the player characters, tailoring them to the mystery and explaining why they're willing to risk themselves.
- **Stereotypes:** The player characters are instantly recognizable archetypes, often with glaring character flaws that lead them into danger.

MINISERIES (P. 132):

- **Questionnaire:** Players and the GM collaborate to explore the characters' psyches, and why they're inextricably linked to the horror *Modes of Terror and Madness*.
- **Spiral of Misery:** Emotional ties bind the characters together — they're fighting for people and things they care about.

CAMPAIGNS (P. 155):

- **Drives:** Each character has an individual reason to thwart the forces of the Outer Dark.
- **Group Goals:** The player characters have banded together to accomplish a shared goal, and won't be dissuaded from this objective.

BUYING ABILITIES

Starting *Fear Itself* characters receive a **variable number of points** to buy Investigative Abilities, depending on group size, and **60 points** to purchase General Abilities.

# OF PLAYERS	INVESTIGATIVE BUILD POINTS
2	16
3	12
4+	10

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

No matter how many players you have in your group, everyone gets 60 points to spend on General Abilities. All players get 1 point in Health and 1 in Stability for free. At the GM's discretion, characters who are neither combat experts nor psychics may purchase the General Ability of Fleeing at a rate of 2 points for each build point spent. If you're having trouble spending all of your points, buy more Fleeing.

Some abilities are **capped**.

If an Investigative Ability is capped, you can't buy it during character creation, unless you are the group's resident combat/investigation expert. You can add it to your character during play, but only by justifying in-character how you acquired this familiarity. Maybe you've learned some tips from the resident expert, or have taken a night course.

If a General Ability is capped, and you're not the group's resident combat/investigation expert, the maximum value you can ever purchase in that ability, at the start or during play, is half the value (rounding up, if necessary) that the combat/investigation expert has invested in it.

Josie's character, police cadet Shakira deMoraes, is the group's resident combat/investigation expert. During character creation, Josie buys 8 points of Shooting, a capped ability. The other players are all limited to 4 or fewer points of Shooting.

After several sessions, she increases her Shooting to 10. Now any other player may increase their Shooting rating up to 5.

In the unlikely event that no one in your group wants to play a combat/investigation specialist, the players

may buy only 1 point of any capped Investigative Ability, and no more than 4 points of any capped General Ability.

Another limit applies to General Abilities: your second highest rating (aside from Fleeing) must be at least half that of your highest rating (aside from Fleeing.)

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

If you want, you can save build points from character creation to spend later. If your GM is running an ongoing series, you'll accumulate additional build points during play.

HIDING AND FLEEING

Two General Abilities are available at a discount. If your Fleeing is equal to or higher than your Athletics, then you get 2 Fleeing points for every build point spent. Therefore, if you have Athletics 0, all your Fleeing is half price.

Hiding works the same way: if your Hiding is equal to or higher than your Infiltration, then further Hiding points can be bought at a 2-for-1 discount.

Erik has 10 points left to spend on his General Abilities. He puts 2 points into Athletics and 3 points into Infiltration. He puts the remaining 5 build points into Hiding. The first 3 build points put into Hiding only buy 1 point of Hiding each, as his Hiding score doesn't yet equal or exceed his Infiltration. The last 2 build points count for double, increasing his Hiding by 4. Erik ends up with Athletics 2, Infiltration 3, and Hiding 7.

Infiltration does everything Hiding can do and more; Athletics is universally better than Fleeing. This discount is designed to reward characters who run away and hide instead of trying to confront horror head-on.

ABILITIES

The following abilities are usually available to *Fear Itself* characters, and are suitable for a

Fear Itself

generic modern-day horror game. The GM may provide a different ability list for games that take place in more outré settings.

Abilities followed by an asterisk may be capped if the GM is using quotas.

Spending Guidelines

If you're new to the system and unsure as to how to spend your build points, use the following quick pick method.

- For Investigative Abilities, go through the list as a group, making sure you have all of the abilities covered. Once you've chosen your abilities, spend your remaining points on your favorites. Unless you've an extremely pressing reason to do so, don't put more than 3 points into any one Investigative Ability. Combat/investigation types should spend an extra point or two on Cop Talk and Investigative Procedure.
- For General Abilities, spend 8-12 points each on Health and Stability. Pick three or four other highlight abilities and spend around 8 points on each. Then spread around the remaining points among the other abilities. When in doubt, invest in Fleeing. Combat/investigation characters should concentrate on Scuffling and Shooting, and to a lesser extent, Athletics, Drive, and Infiltration.
- You need to have at least 1 point in a General Ability in order to make a roll – if you have no rating in a General Ability, you automatically fail. You'll have to decide whether to spread your points thinly to cover all the General Abilities, or to accept a few weak spots in order to concentrate on other abilities.

Especially in the case of General Abilities, these are guidelines for creating a perfectly serviceable baseline character. Feel free to deviate from them, within the rules, to create unusual character concepts. If you want to be able to take endless physical punishment, exceed the recommended Health. If you want to start out as only marginally sane, skimp on Stability points, and so on.

Swapping Points

If the GM allows it, two players may trade Investigative and General points between their characters, at a rate of 1 Investigative build point = 3 General build points. Usually this occurs when one player wants to play a nerdy academic with a lot of Academic and Technical Investigative Abilities, and another player is intent on being a combat expert or athlete. A maximum of 3 Investigative points/9 General build points can be swapped.

ACADEMIC

- **History:** Knowledge of history.
- **Humanities:** Philosophy, theology, archaeology. A solid Classical education.
- **Languages:** You don't need to pick the languages you know in advance; you can retroactively choose to know some obscure language if needed.
- **Law:** Knowledge of legal matters.
- **Occult Studies*:** Expertise in the occult. This ability doesn't give you any supernatural powers or abilities – it just means you know a great deal about strange beliefs and unnatural events.
- **Research:** Digging up information in a library or online.
- **Social Sciences:** Anthropology, economics, sociology, and other "people studies."
- **Trivia:** A random assortment of obscure facts that might come in oddly useful.

INTERPERSONAL

- **Bullshit Detector:** Knowing when someone is lying.
- **Bureaucracy:** Dealing with an entrenched system and those entangled in it.
- **Cop Talk:** Appearing to be an upstanding, trustworthy citizen when dealing with law enforcement.
- **Flattery:** Getting clues by charming people.
- **Flirting:** Obtaining clues by seducing people.
- **Impersonate:** Pretending to be someone else.
- **Interrogation:** Getting information from someone in a semi-formal debriefing or interview.
- **Intimidation:** Forcing someone to tell you what you want to hear.
- **Negotiation:** Making deals and trading for information.
- **Reassurance:** Calming people down, coming across as trustworthy and kind to someone suffering from trauma.
- **Streetwise:** Dealing with criminals and the downtrodden.

TECHNICAL

- **Computer Use:** Finding information on a computer system; hacking; coding.
- **Investigative Procedure*:** Forensic investigation.
- **Medicine:** Covers anatomy, pharmacy, biology, and so forth.
- **Notice:** Spotting things that are out of place.
- **Outdoor Survival:** Knowledge of natural history; wilderness survival skills.

- **Photography:** Taking and manipulating photographs; spotting visual clues in an image.
- **Science:** A catchall for physics, chemistry, and related fields.

GENERAL

- **Athletics:** Running, climbing, acrobatics, dodging. Having Athletics 8+ makes it harder for bad guys to hit you.
- **Driving:** Operating a vehicle.
- **Filch:** Sleight of hand and pickpocketing.
- **Fleeing:** Running away.
- **Health:** Your physical resilience and fortitude.
- **Hiding:** Concealing yourself from enemies.
- **Infiltration:** Sneaking, hiding, opening locks.
- **Mechanics:** Repairing or building devices.
- **Medic:** First aid (restores Health).
- **Preparedness:** Having equipment to hand. With Preparedness, you can retroactively declare you had some item in your possession all along ("*Of course I brought a handsaw!*").
- **Scuffling*:** Fighting at close range.
- **Sense Trouble:** Spotting danger before it strikes.
- **Shooting*:** Using a firearm.
- **Shrink:** Psychological treatment and counseling. Restores Stability.
- **Stability:** Your mental resilience and sanity.

PERSONAL DETAILS

Fill in your character's name, age, and occupation (if any), and come up with a quick physical description. Take your abilities into account when describing your character – someone with a high Athletics isn't going to be slight or doughy; if you've invested 4 precious Investigative build points into Photography, then you're almost certainly wearing a jacket with lots of pockets, and carrying an expensive camera around your neck.

Think of one or two mannerisms or verbal quirks for your character (maybe ones that only show up under stress).

- Who's your character's emergency contact? Who gets the call if the worst happens?
- Where would your character run if in trouble?
- What does your character want? What are their dreams? What are they living for?

Fear Itself

SOURCES OF STABILITY

When under stress, each of us searches for reasons to keep it together and persevere. In *Fear Itself*, you quantify your character's Stability by specifying its sources. For every 3 points you invest in Stability, you must name one thing that keeps you sane when the terrors of the world threaten to shred your psyche. (In a one-shot game, you only need to pick one source at the start; you'll discover the others in play.)

These Sources of Stability fall into three categories: personality traits, activities, and people.

- Innate sanity-preserving **personality traits** might include stoic, Zen-like, or emotionally resilient. Define these as you please, subject to GM approval. GMs are encouraged to allow broad latitude, only ruling out obviously nonsensical traits. If you pick more than one personality trait, see to it that they don't contradict one another. For example, don't pair "sense of humor" with "grim implacability."

- **Activities** are pursuits or hobbies that calm you, allowing you to regain your sense of perspective after a stressful incident. Again, let creativity be your guide. The GM will disallow blatantly ridiculous choices. Efforts to use these pursuits to overcome plot obstacles within the game must be backed up with relevant skills. Even if you pick hang gliding as a stability-granting hobby, you won't be able to hang glide your way into the enemy compound unless you've also bought the Athletics ability.

- By far your richest Source of Stability is a **support network of friends and family** whose strength you draw on in times of quiet. A name and identifying phrase are sufficient for each. You may not use other player characters; they go through the same stresses you do and remind you of the horrors you confront. It's permissible, but risky, for multiple characters to lean on the same folks as members of their support network.

Relying on others is a source of strength, but also of danger. Once you come to the attention of entities of



the Outer Dark, such as the Mystery Man, they may use your loved ones against you. They may turn them to evil, possess them, or take the tried and true route of subjecting them to horrible tortures. If anything bad happens to them, you not only face immediate, difficult Stability tests, but may permanently lose the rating points they're linked to. Your spouse, parent, or child can no longer soothe your spirit if you can only visit their scarred and broken bodies in a secluded mental hospital.

You may not select more personality traits than you do people, or more activities than you do people.

Ralf buys 15 points of Stability for his character, the low-rent pickpocket Michel McCoy. 15 divided by 3 is 5, so he needs to choose 5 Sources of Stability. He sees Michel as a bit of a loner, and so starts with a personality trait: self-reliance. Then he picks an activity: throwing darts. Like many roleplayers, Ralf prefers his characters without messy emotional entanglements, but now he's faced with a dilemma. He can't select more personality traits than he does people. The same goes for activities. So he must break down and pick a person to relate to. He chooses Thelma, his alcoholic landlady, who's always there with a reassuring word and a slightly dirty glass of warm whiskey whenever he needs somebody to talk to. Now he can go ahead and pick a personality trait, wise-cracking humor, and a second activity, rereading the works of Friedrich Nietzsche.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Next select a **personal goal** for your character. Even if the GM wants your characters to be familiar with the supernatural at the outset, your personal goal should be of a mundane nature. Pick something you can actually take concrete steps to achieve. Imagine your character is at loose ends, and the GM asks you what you're doing. Can you describe a course of action you can undertake to move you closer to this goal, in which you'll have to work to overcome obstacles? If you can visualize such a scene, one that's dramatic and interesting to describe, and for other players to listen to, you've got a strong personal goal. If not, rethink.

Interesting goals often involve the people you choose as Sources of Stability; see above. Be careful about linking goals to your Stability-granting activities, however. Calming pursuits may be good for recovering shattered sanity, but don't lend themselves to dramatic scenes in which you struggle to reach your personal goal.

The best goals require your character to undergo some kind of personal change, or challenge the people around her to do the same. They have emotional consequences, for you and for others. Even if your character is otherwise unsympathetic, the pursuit of your goals should suggest some kind of hope for redemption. Ideally, your fellow players will be rooting for you to succeed, and will feel bad if you fail. This sense of stakes provides a sense of ongoing drama, apart from the gore and the soul-eating and the abject, terrorized weeping.

Sample goals:

- Care for an infirm parent
- Get into a good college
- Get your lover off heroin
- Prove the untruth of accusations against you
- Prove you can still do your job after a disastrous setback
- Pursue your dreams of pop stardom
- Raise funds for much needed church repairs
- Regain custody of your child
- Regain the respect of a justifiably disapproving parent or mentor
- Save your business from bankruptcy
- Woo the coolly aloof popular student

Consider yourself empowered to create supporting characters that the GM will portray during the course of the game. The GM may remain consistent with your initial description of these characters, but may surprise you during play by allowing them to change over time, or reveal previously unknown facets of their past histories or personalities.

Whenever possible, goals should relate to the game's premise. For example, let's say that the GM proposes a premise in which all the PCs work for the same large and utterly mundane corporation. That implies that a certain amount of the action throughout the game will center on the workplace. Suitable goals might therefore include:

- Erasing rumors of an embarrassing office fling
- Finding the office thief
- Getting that promotion
- Mollifying a blackmailing coworker
- Undermining your psycho supervisor
- Winning funding for your department

Collaborate with other players to create overlapping goals. Strife between major characters is a genre staple, so feel empowered to create goals contrary to those of the other players.

CHAPTER 3: TIPS FOR PLAYERS



Mastery of the following concepts will help your character to prosper in an environment of Unremitting Horror. Well, maybe not prosper, *per se*. Let's say, it may keep you alive and sane for slightly longer than average...

BELIEVE YOU MIGHT BE SUCCESSFUL

Yes, this is a game of horror, in which your characters might well be horribly disfigured, slaughtered, or driven irrevocably insane. That said, the best way to fail is to become defensive and do nothing. Don't let the fear bring your planning ability to a halt. Instead, talk through the most obvious options, quickly pick the one that seems the most appealing, and then execute that plan. Will something horrible happen? Of course it will — it's a horror game! Something appalling will happen, no matter what your plan is. So choose a plan, be bold, and seize the initiative. Pick the type of terrifying risk you're most able to confront.

As in any game, your GM will allow any halfway credible plan you come up with a good chance of success, and will place nasty obstacles in your way to make it more exciting. So pick something quickly, grit your teeth, and plunge into the dark, knowing you have no better choice.

FIND A WAY TO BE PROACTIVE

Fear Itself characters are ordinary people who find themselves dropped suddenly into a world of horror. Realistically, they might respond to extreme violence and eruptions of supernatural awfulness by curling up into a ball and doing nothing. Although it makes perfect sense for your characters to freak out and become paralyzed by fear, this is not very interesting, at least after an obligatory scene of muttering in disbelief. When creating characters, or developing their personalities during play, think about realistic ways to portray them as proactive and resourceful, even in the face of mind-shattering horror. Players in horror games often make the mistake of thinking solely about how realistic their responses are. Instead, make interesting choices and then find a way to make them realistic. An interesting choice is one that keeps your character moving and doing things.

Most of the time a group of players gets stuck, it's because they've considered and rejected not only the foolish options, but the sensible ones as well. Often you can find a way forward by refusing to be talked out of half-decent plans. There is no perfect plan. At best, you'll find one that requires desperation and daring, and might still cost you your lives. In a world of unremitting horror, safety is an illusion, so you might as well do *something*.

WHEN STUCK, LOOK FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you are legitimately stuck, and not just rejecting perfectly viable courses of action, don't just stick close to home, hashing over your options. Go out and find more information. Ask yourself what you need to know in order to formulate a plan. Then figure out how to get that information, and go out and get it.

TALK TO PEOPLE

Many groups are reluctant to use their Interpersonal Abilities, figuring that they can get into less trouble by sticking purely to physical clues, or hacking into their subjects' computers from afar. This is a disastrous mistake. Talking to witnesses, experts, and informants is by far the best way of gaining information about your situation. With information, you can find that coveted least worst plan that will lead you to the grim final confrontation.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Expect to find only one major clue per scene. Although you shouldn't be too quick to abandon a scene for the next one, most groups make the opposite mistake, returning endlessly to the same few places or witnesses, hoping to scrape more info out of them. If you find a clue that leads you somewhere else — go there! Chances are, once you're there, you'll find another clue that will in turn lead you to a new scene, with a further clue that takes you to a third scene, and so on. Unsuccessful groups endlessly turn over the same ground. Successful ones follow a trail, just like in a kids' game of treasure hunt.

DEPUTIZE YOURSELF

An ordinary person might be reluctant to go out and involve themselves personally in investigations best handled by the professionals. But you've stumbled into a world of unearthly menace

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where, as far as you know, there are no professionals. You may feel cosmically ill-prepared to face the threat in front of you, but you know that no one else is up to it either. As improbable as it may seem, you must take on the mantle of unofficial investigators.

Rely on your Interpersonal Abilities to gain entrance to situations that would normally be closed to regular folks. Come up with suitable cover stories if need be. Passively playing the good citizen won't save you. You must carry the ball into the enemy's court, and part the dark veil of the unknown. A few moments of reluctance is understandable and realistic. More than that is boring. Accept your weird new role in life, and make the most of it.

RISK FACTORS MAKE YOU ACTIVE

If you ever find yourself looking to your Risk Factor as an excuse for not taking interesting action, stop right there, back up, and remember what Risk Factors are for. They're to push you forward into the plot, not to give you an excuse to cower and shoot down each others' plans. If you're skeptical, you're not skeptical of a decent plan. You're skeptical of the existence of the supernatural, which motivates you to get out there and poke the gooey things with a stick. Look to your Risk Factors as sources of inspiration, reminding you of the sort of action your character favors.

THINK ABOUT THE GROUP

Lone investigators get killed. Splitting up to cover more ground may refer to the area splattered by your intestines when you're dismembered by a monster. Share information with your fellow players, and look for ways to support them both tactically and dramatically.

Look for opportunities to give other player characters the spotlight. Instead of hammering every witness with your Interrogation and Intimidation skills, hang back once in a while to let someone else take a different approach. Rather than finding reasons to keep non-combat characters out of the action ("it's too dangerous for you to come to the haunted house with us"), look for reasons to bring them along ("could you use Mechanics to set up some sort of tripwires and alarms so we're not ambushed by the ghost again?").

Similarly, look for ways that your Risk Factors can intersect with those of the other player

characters. If someone else's character concept is "former cop who made a bad call, and is now scared of making tough decisions," see if you can engineer a situation where that character has to face her fear and take charge once more.

EMBRACE THE MUNDANE

It's not all about chasing clues and running away from monsters. Your character is an ordinary person plunged into a realm of unremitting horror, but he or she still has a life — a job, a home, family and friends, relationships, goals, hopes, dreams, hobbies. You might have a favorite restaurant, a regular bowling night, an annoying landlord, a pet cat, a sick neighbor who relies on you for errands. Take time to breathe and play through mundane scenes — the contrast will make the horror scarier. And, you never know, you might find a clue or some other advantage in the mundane parts of your life.

EMBRACE FLASHBACKS AND DIRECTED SCENES

You may take to directed scenes and flashbacks (see p. 66) like a duck to water, or find them confounding. If you're having trouble with them, remember their purpose: to make the characters come alive, by dramatizing their personalities and backstories. These scenes are not really about winning or losing, but if you want to think of them in those terms, you win when they expose something interesting or entertaining about your character, and lose when you fail to reveal anything.

Maybe you think that your GM is trying to take your character in an unwanted direction by posing certain situations to you. The way to get around this is not to resist, or to retreat into inaction. This will just force your GM to put your character under even greater pressure. Instead, look for a way to pivot the scene in an active, interesting way, to make the point about the character that you want. Don't avoid conflict — change the terms of the conflict to suit your own objectives.

These scenes improve your character's chance of survival by making them seem more human, sympathetic, and real. When your GM is confronted by the necessity of gruesomely dispatching a player character, she will, consciously or otherwise, tend to



favor the three-dimensional characters and write off the cardboard cutouts. If all you allow your character to be is a tight-lipped, enigmatic badass, your GM can easily bump you off, knowing you'll probably create a brand new tight-lipped, enigmatic badass replacement. Interchangeable characters are always first on the chopping block. A unique character everyone in the group cares about is not so easily replaced.

Genre fans have a term called "script immunity" that supposedly explains why cherished iconic characters survive situations that would doom extras and walk-ons. Think of flashbacks and directed scenes as tools for creating your own script immunity.

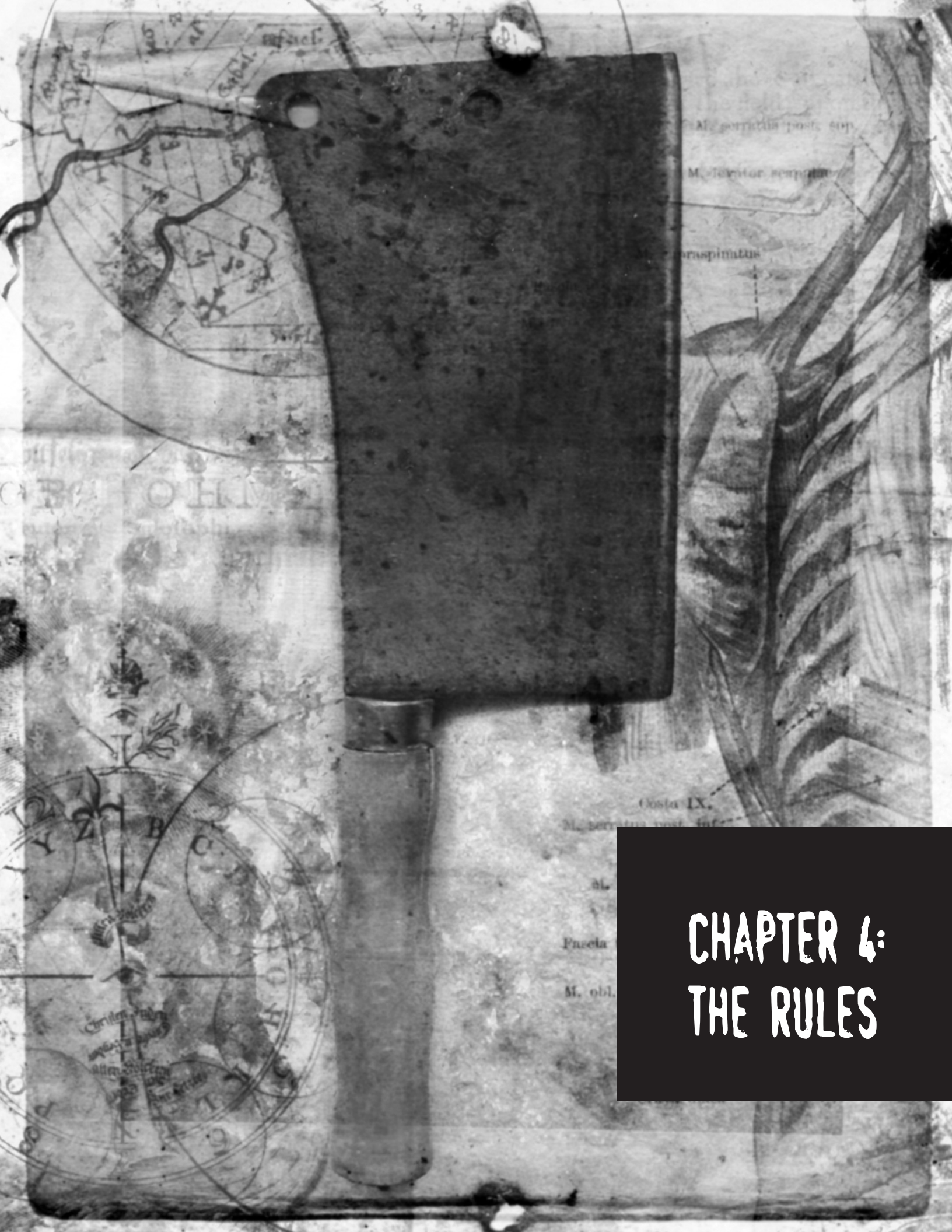
FIGHT THE MONSTERS, NOT THE GM

Especially at the start of an adventure, work with the GM to set up the circumstances that trap your characters in unremitting horror. Don't try to undermine the GM by picking holes or pointing out logical inconsistencies, especially in areas where you possess extensive real-world knowledge. Instead, suggest justifications that support the GM's premise. For example, if the GM describes your characters getting lost in the woods while hiking, don't come up with a dozen reasons why your character would never get lost. Instead, express surprise or confusion about how your GPS device is broken, or talk about how the old bridge across the canyon was blown down in a recent storm, so you had to take an unfamiliar route that's now backfired.

RETREAT ISN'T DEFEAT

There's a reason this game explicitly calls out Fleeing as an ability. Often, the dangers you'll face are overwhelming. In other roleplaying games, there's an assumption that the GM will play fair and never put you up against impossible odds; *Fear Itself* makes no such guarantees. Monsters may be invincible, or vulnerable only to a particular countermeasure that you've got to discover through investigation. So, run away when danger threatens! Fall back to a safe place or refuge to catch your breath and regroup, rather than staying and fighting.

Similarly, hiding from monsters and sneaking past them is a much better approach than attacking. Let's put it this way — against monsters, think of combat skills like Scuffling as ways to distract or slow down a monster as it devours you. Are you prepared to make that sacrifice?



CHAPTER 4: THE RULES

In *Fear Itself*, the players take on the role of investigators – unlucky, driven people caught in horrific circumstances. The GM's role is to torment and terrify the investigators as they pursue the mystery to its bigger end.

Player characters are described in four ways:

- by their **personal details**, the information that will be written on their headstones
- by their **Risk Factors**, the things that draw them into the mystery
- by their **Investigative Abilities**, the skills they use to find clues and go deeper into the mystery
- by their **General Abilities**, the skills they use to survive the dangers and horrors

Risk Factors and personal details don't have any mechanical components. See Chapter 2 to learn how to create an investigator and assign values to Investigative and General Abilities. This chapter describes the basic rule mechanics for Investigative Abilities and General Abilities.

To find a clue in a *Fear Itself* scenario, all you need to do is use the appropriate Investigative ability in the right scene. There's no roll, and it doesn't cost you any points. If you have, say, the **History** ability, then if there's a history-related clue to be found in the scene, and you describe that you're using History, you get the clue. The GM might describe it like this:

Thanks to your expertise in History, you can identify the stone dagger you found as an obsidian-bladed Aztec sacrificial dagger.

Any of the following are equally acceptable ways of invoking an Investigative Ability.

Can I tell anything about the stone dagger with my History ability?

Stand back! I'm a professor of history! Let me look at the murder weapon!

You said the dagger's made of stone. Is it an improvised weapon, or more like an archaeological artifact? I've got History – does that tell me anything?

A forgiving GM dealing with a new player might allow:

Player: I examine the dagger closely. Anything weird about it?

GM: Have you got History?

This, however, doesn't work:

GM: So, you've found a corpse in the museum. He's got a dagger in his chest.

Player: I have History. Give me all History-related clues in this area.

You need to specifically describe how you're using the ability.

The GM will have prepared most of the clues in advance when designing the mystery (assuming she's not winging it), but might come up with more clues on the fly in response to player questions.

CORE CLUES

Core Clues are a special sort of clue that points the way to the next scene. They're the connective tissue of the story, ensuring the players can progress from one scene to the next. Core clues get discussed in detail on page 57, but the key point to remember is that **Core Clues always get found**.

Each scene in the adventure has one or more Core Clues leading away from it, so the players always have at least one lead to follow.

For example, take that stone dagger. Investigating it might lead to three other scenes with the following Core Clues:

- **History:** You know a local expert in Aztec culture, Professor Jones. Maybe he knows more about this particular item.
- **Investigative Procedure:** A close examination of the blade discovers traces of fresh blood. The weapon was hastily wiped clean afterward, but enough remains to suggest that it was used to spill a lot of blood. It might be worth checking hospital admissions and morgues to see if there was a recent murder.
- **Computer Use:** Digging around online, you find an anonymous YouTube video showing a masked man running around the woods, waving a dagger. The video and sound quality are awful, but examining it closely, you're pretty sure that it's the same dagger. Furthermore, you know the copse of trees where it was shot.

Fear Itself

SIMPLE SEARCHES

Not all clues require an Investigative Ability to find. You can find that scrawled suicide note or the obvious footprint in the mud without possessing **Evidence Collection**; you don't need **Outdoor Survival** to realize those are claw marks on the door.

0-POINT CLUES

Many clues aren't Core Clues (they're not necessary for the players to make progress through the scenario), but aren't important enough to warrant charging a point spend for them. These are 0-point (no point spend, hence free) clues. Use them to add atmospheric details or drop cryptic foreshadowing. For example, by the end of the adventure, the GM intends for the player characters to be fleeing a swarm of monstrous prehistoric insects, released by recent logging in the old growth forest. (The GM really hopes her players don't remember that episode of *The X-Files*.) When examining a car that drove through a swarm, **Outdoor Survival** or **Mechanic** spots that the car's air intake is clogged with tens of thousands of crushed bugs, which caused the engine to choke and stall.

INVESTIGATIVE SPENDS AND BENEFITS

If you've got the appropriate ability, you find clues associated with that ability. You also have a pool of points that you can spend to get extra benefits from that ability. The GM may have built benefits into the mystery in advance, or come up with them on the spot. You don't usually know what the benefit is in advance, or even if one is available, but you can't waste points — if you spend points and no benefit is available, the points are refunded.

You can, if appropriate, suggest a benefit, but the GM can freely refuse.

Benefits might be:

- An advantage at the end of the scenario
 - o **Occult Studies** gives the Core Clue that the cult is trying to summon a demon. An **Occult Studies** spend lets the character recall the true name of the demon, which will make banishing it easier when the investigators attempt to interrupt the ritual at midnight.

- Extra information

- o **History** lets you identify the dagger as an Aztec sacrificial blade; a **History** spend lets you identify the particular blade, where it was found, and the legends associated with it.

- Faster access to information

- o It would normally take you hours to make an antidote to the poison with **Science**, but spend a point and you can get it done in time to save your friend.

- Avoiding danger

- o **Outdoor Survival** lets you identify the bite marks on the unconscious young woman as those of a wolf. An **Outdoor Survival** spend lets you spot the telltale little scar on the back of her neck where a radio tracker tag was implanted beneath the skin; if the tag isn't removed, the investigators are later ambushed by the military bioweapons team researching werewolves.

- Skipping a scene

- o Instead of visiting the dive bar filled with dangerous criminals, a **Streetwise** spend means you already know who deals in stolen items in this town.

- Reducing the Difficulty of a General Ability test (see p. 38)

- o When making a **Hiding** test to hide from the monster, a **Notice** spend lets you find the concealed attic entrance in time.

- Knowing someone related to that field

- o Can I spend a point of **Research** to know a newspaper fact-checker who could get us access to their paper archives?

- Impressing everyone with your talents

- o With a **Photography** spend, you impress the museum owner with your portfolio, and she invites you to an early preview of the Aztec history exhibit.

- Getting extra assistance

- o **Cop Talk** gets you access to the police records about the murder; a **Cop Talk** spend means you're able to convince one of the officers that you're trustworthy. He doesn't believe in Aztec ghost monsters, but he's willing to trust you and look the other way while you investigate.

Some clues can be found using any of several Investigative Abilities. You might be able to get the same information in different ways using **Flattery** or **Intimidation**; **Occult Studies** might identify a sacrificial dagger too, along with **History**.

What Do Pool Points Represent?

Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. Players who are more active will use up their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine.

Remember, all characters are significant to the story. Pool points measure your opportunities to demonstrate that significance during any given scenario.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps.

In *Fear Itself*, this is represented most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to an abstract construct — the length of the episode.

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

Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of clues and benefits.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

Investigative Abilities are divided into three categories — Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical — for ease of reference and organization. Sometimes, an adventure

might say “any suitable Interpersonal ability” or “any applicable Technical ability” or suchlike; that’s just a shorthand for “any genuine effort on the part of the investigators overcomes this obstacle.”

BULLSHIT DETECTOR (INTERPERSONAL)

You can tell when people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance, but sometimes you can spot liars on television too. Unfortunately, nearly everyone lies, especially when facing possible trouble from the authorities. Sometimes you can infer why they’re lying, but it’s hard to reliably discern motive or get at the facts they’re working to obscure.

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

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your Bullshit Detector. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you. In such cases, you can tell that someone isn’t being wholly honest, but can’t pick out individual mistruths.

Sample Clues

- spot that someone’s hiding the truth
- realize that someone’s not to be trusted
- sense that someone is honest and trustworthy

Sample Benefits

- zero in on exactly what someone is hiding (“You notice she always changes the topic when you ask about her family”)

Why No Lying Ability?

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

Fear Itself

BUREAUCRACY (INTERPERSONAL)

You understand the ins and outs of bureaucratic organizations, whether they are governmental offices or large business concerns. You know how to get what you want from them in an expeditious manner, and with a minimum of ruffled feathers.

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

Sample Clues

- persuade officials to provide internal information
- quickly obtain obscure public records
- find out the structure, history, and agenda of a bureaucracy
- find the person who really knows what's going on

Sample Benefits

- borrow equipment or supplies
- expedite the processing of a request
- game the system to cause bureaucratic trouble for others
- declare that you know an old school friend who works in the bureaucracy

COMPUTER SCIENCE (TECHNICAL)

You're adept with computers, and can write sophisticated code of your own, as well as analyzing that written by others, and retrieving information from hard drives and other media.

Sample Clues

- break open encrypted files or decipher codes
- dig through social media for relevant information
- recover hidden, erased, or corrupted computer files
- gain illicit access to a computer system

Sample Benefits

- hack into a secure computer system
- write a program to automatically sort through records or monitor information feeds
- have an obscure or highly specialized piece of computer equipment just lying around

COP TALK (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Sample Clues

- coolly ply cops for confidential information
- imply that you are a colleague, authorized to participate in their cases
- give a civilian the impression that you're a police officer
- convince a police officer that there's a genuine danger

Sample Benefits

- look like you belong in a police station, allowing you to sneak around
- get excused for minor infractions
- answer questions to allay suspicion or conceal supernatural activity

FLATTERY (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Sample Clues

- flatter someone into revealing confidential information
- smooth over interactions with prickly or self-important individuals
- get access to somewhere you shouldn't by presenting yourself as charming and harmless

Sample Benefits

- persuade someone to go out of their way to assist you
- distract someone with sycophantic blather

FLIRTING (INTERPERSONAL)

You're adept at winning cooperation from people who find you sexually attractive or charming. It's up to you whether a high rating in Flirting means that you are physically alluring, or simply exude a sexual magnetism unrelated to your looks.

Sample Clues

- convince someone to open up to you and reveal information

- spot attraction (unrequited or otherwise) between two GM characters (GMCs)

Sample Benefits

- get a date with or seduce a receptive partner
- blend in at a nightclub or bar

HISTORY (ACADEMIC)

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

Sample Clues

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

Sample Benefits

- establish that you've got a contact in a museum or history faculty
- decipher an old document or grimoire
- recall how to properly use an antique weapon (giving a 3-point Weapons or Shooting pool)

HUMANITIES (ACADEMIC)

You're broadly acquainted with the classics, literature, philosophy, religion, archaeology, and the arts. You may be a well-read autodidact or have an undergraduate degree, or portions thereof, on your résumé.

The Humanities ability may reflect a basic grounding in all of these disciplines, with specialization for your profession. If you're an ordained minister, you'll know a great deal about your own faith, and see other disciplines through that prism. If you're a musician, you'll know the other disciplines via your knowledge of music history, and so on.

Sample Clues

- identify a religious reference or icon
- discern the underlying meaning in a poem
- recall a myth about a monster that has an eerie similarity to your present circumstances

Sample Benefits

- have a contact in the relevant field of study
- substitute Humanities for an Interpersonal ability when dealing with someone who shares your interest

(for example, replacing Flattery when talking to a musician, or replacing Reassurance when talking to a fellow member of your faith)

IMPERSONATE (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult, requiring a spend for even the smallest interaction. Prolonged deception is virtually impossible.

Sample Clues

- gain entry to a building disguised as a maintenance worker, cleaner, technician, or other invisible profession
- obtain information through social engineering ("*Hi, I'm calling on behalf of...*")
- fool someone into believing you're part of their group

Sample Benefits

- pose convincingly as a police officer, health inspector, or other professional
- reduce the Difficulty of an Infiltration test by appearing to belong somewhere you shouldn't be

INTERROGATION (INTERPERSONAL)

You're trained in extracting information from suspects and witnesses in the context of a formal police-style interview. This must take place in an official setting, where the subject is confined or feels under threat of confinement, and recognizes your authority (whether real or feigned). Interrogation is the best Interpersonal skill at cutting through deception and prevarication to get at the unvarnished truth.

Sample Clues

- make a captured cultist reveal the specifics of their blasphemous ritual
- get a criminal to tell you exactly what he saw when robbing the haunted house

Sample Benefits

- convince someone you've interrogated to never talk about what they saw
- get through being on the wrong side of a police interrogation without giving anything away

Fear Itself

INTIMIDATION (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Sample Clues

- force someone to tell you what they know
- convince someone that you're tough and mean enough to handle the truth

Sample Benefits

- inspire the subject to leave the area
- quell a subject's desire to attempt violence against you or others
- drive roughshod over an obstacle, trading expediency against future blowback ("*Screw this, I shove the clerk out of the way and grab the case files.*")

INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURE (TECHNICAL)

This skill is a catchall for various Investigative Abilities, reflecting the omni-competence of heroic police officers and detectives in horror stories. In a game where most of the investigators are ordinary people — amateur sleuths, as opposed to professional trained detectives — it makes sense to centralize and cap access to this sort of technical expertise. (See "Buying Abilities" on p. 12 for more.)

- Ballistics (processing evidence related to the use of firearms)
- Electronic Surveillance (using audiovisual equipment to gather evidence)
- Evidence Collection (bagging and tagging important clues)
- Explosive Devices (defusing and assembling explosive devices and reconstructing detonated ones)
- Document Analysis (studying handwriting, typescripts, paper, and so forth)
- Fingerprinting (finding, transferring, and matching fingerprints)
- Forensic Accounting (combing through financial data, looking for irregularities)
- Forensic Anthropology (performing autopsies on deceased subjects to determine their cause of death)
- Forensic Entomology (studying eggs and larvae in a decomposing corpse)
- Forensic Psychology (application of psychological

insight to the solving of criminal cases and gleaning of useful information from observation of individuals)

- Textual Analysis (studying the content of texts, as opposed to the physical characteristics of documents)

Any of these fields might be broken out into a separate Investigative Ability in a game that focuses on professional as opposed to amateur investigators. See "Other Investigative Abilities" on p. 32.

Sample Clues

- varies by specialty

Sample Benefits

- conceal or erase evidence

LANGUAGES (ACADEMIC)

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

Sample Clues

- translate an obscure occult scroll
- get an accurate account from a witness who doesn't speak the dominant language of the region
- recognize a reference to a well-known piece of literature associated with a particular language

Sample Benefits

- substitute Languages for an Interpersonal ability such as Reassurance when dealing with someone who doesn't speak the dominant local language

LAW (ACADEMIC) **NEW**

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

Sample Clues

- obtain and interpret legal documents
- spot signs of legal chicanery or unusual clauses
- argue with police and prosecutors

Sample Benefits

- have a contact in the legal establishment, police force, high society — or, indeed, virtually any walk of life (“*Can I spend a point of Law to have an ex-client who owes me a favor? A burglar, maybe, or a security expert who can help us get into the factory?*”)
- impress or intimidate someone with your legal knowledge

Changes from 1st Edition

Some abilities have been changed or expanded in this new edition of *Fear Itself*. If you see this symbol **NEW**, it means that the ability has been added or redesigned, and even experienced GMs should read the description.

MEDICINE (TECHNICAL) **NEW**

You’re familiar with human anatomy, biochemistry, pharmacy, and pathology. You may have attended med school (with Medicine 2+, you could be a qualified doctor). This ability doesn’t cover first aid and caring for injured patients — for that, you need Medic (p. 35). (It’s unusual, but not unheard of, to have points in Medicine without investing even a point or two in Medic.)

Sample Clues

- guess at the type and origin of injuries, distinguish needle puncture wounds from bite marks, spot bruising caused by restraints
- spot the symptoms of a disease or malady
- identify and guess at the effects of a drug
- evaluate the progress of a disease and suggest necessary treatments
- conduct an autopsy, although it’s not your area of expertise — Investigative Procedure is better for this

Sample Benefits

- slow the progress of an infection
- come up with a possible treatment for a previously unknown disease
- gain access to medical records or morgues

NEGOTIATION (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Sample Clues

- know the appropriate bribe to get information
- trade for a clue
- guess what the other party wants when bargaining

Sample Benefits

- mediate between parties that are at odds
- get a good deal when bartering
- bargain to find a mutually beneficial solution instead of backing down from a threat

OCCULT STUDIES (ACADEMIC) **NEW**

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

In most games, your knowledge of the occult is usually that of a detached, even disapproving, outsider. This ability does not allow you to work magic or summon supernatural entities. Doing either of these things is bad; it weakens the fabric of reality and warps the practitioner’s psyche. You can, at best, fake your way through a ritual while attempting to pass yourself off as a believer. Even in this situation, your actions do not evoke supernatural effects.

If genuine supernatural powers are available to the player characters, the GM will let you know.

Sample Clues

- identify the cultural traditions informing a ritual from examining its physical aftermath
- supply historical facts concerning various occult traditions
- guess the intended effect of a ritual from its physical aftermath
- identify occult activities as the work of informed practitioners, teenage posers, or out-and-out cultists

Sample Benefits

- have some degree of credibility and respect in the local fringe/occult community
- declare you have a contact or friend in an occult circle
- Others might say it’s a strange coincidence that you happen to possess a copy of the rare grimoire the investigators desperately need to solve this mystery. You, however, know that coincidence is just how science dismisses the ineffable workings of fate.

Fear Itself

NOTICE (TECHNICAL) **NEW**

You're unusually observant, good at picking up on small but significant details.

Sample Clues

- find a discarded scrap of paper in the brambles
- notice small scratches on the floor, suggesting something was dragged across it
- spot that you're being observed by a shadowy figure in the forest

Sample Benefits

- reduce the Difficulty of a Sense Trouble test
- find a useful item in a junk room

OUTDOOR SURVIVAL (TECHNICAL) **NEW**

You're adept at surviving and navigating in the wilderness. You have an excellent knowledge of plant and animal biology, which may be augmented by an education in ecology, geology, evolution, or some other scientific field, or by long experience and familiarity with the outdoors.

Sample Clues

- recognize when an animal is behaving strangely
- know whether an animal or plant is native to a given area
- identify an animal from hair, bones, or spoor
- identify a plant from a small sample

Sample Benefits

- survive outdoors with minimal equipment
- calm or distract a wild animal
- track someone in the wild
- find edible or medicinal plants in the wild (giving a 3-point Medic pool)

PHOTOGRAPHY (TECHNICAL)

You're proficient in the use of cameras, including still and video photography. You also know your way around sound systems, microphones, and other audiovisual gear.

Sample Clues

- spot manual retouching or digital manipulation in a photographic or video image
- find detailed, high-resolution images within a blurry video or JPEG file



- extrapolate information from a photograph, such as the location the picture was taken, the time of day, unusual shadows, and so forth

Sample Benefits

- expertly retouch and manipulate images
- take accurate photographs of a crime scene so they can be examined in detail later
- set up a concealed camera and microphone

REASSURANCE (INTERPERSONAL)

You get people to do what you want by putting them at ease. You can calm down panicking victims, or elicit information and minor favors by coming across as stalwart and trustworthy.

Sample Clues

- gently extract an account of the attack from a terrified, shocked victim
- prove to a suspicious witness that you're on the level

Sample Benefits

- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis
- temporarily boost someone else's Stability when you're out of Shrink

RESEARCH (ACADEMIC)

You know how to find factual information from books, records, and official sources. You're as comfortable with a card catalog and fiche reader as with an Internet search engine. You know the right people to talk to to gain information in various walks of society, and your phone is full of their contact details.

Sample Clues

- find old records relating to a previous case that matches your current investigation
- collate information from multiple sources to reveal a terrible pattern

Sample Benefits

- finish a research project quicker than anyone could have expected
- arrange a meeting with an expert on a particular topic
- find extra information on a topic

SCIENCE (TECHNICAL)

You maintain a broad knowledge of any scientific field not covered by its own ability in *Fear Itself*. These include astronomy, chemistry, engineering, genetics, paleontology, materials science, physics, and applied technology.

In some games, this ability may be broken out into more specific sciences.

Sample Clues

- perform chemical analysis of a mysterious substance
- predict a particular astronomical conjunction
- understand complex experimental notes left by a mad scientist

Sample Benefits

- have a particular chemical or an obscure piece of equipment to hand
- complete an analysis rapidly
- have a contact in some research institution or university

SOCIAL SCIENCES (ACADEMIC)

You're broadly familiar with the academic fields of anthropology, communication, economics, education, geography, linguistics, political science, and sociology. As with Humanities, you are either well read, have an undergraduate's broad education, or know these other fields through a professional specialization.

Again, this ability may be broken out into more specific abilities in games where more granularity is desirable.

Sample Clues

- identify someone's culture of origin
- skim through accounts and identify illegal activity
- identify pressures and problems in an area

Sample Benefits

- blend into a foreign culture like a native
- remember just enough of a foreign language to get by in basic conversation, even if you don't have any free Languages

STREETWISE (INTERPERSONAL)

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

Sample Clues

- identify unsafe locations and dangerous people
- gather underworld rumors

Sample Benefits

- deploy criminal etiquette to avoid fights and conflicts
- have a contact in the criminal underworld
- reduce the Difficulty of a Preparedness check by accepting stolen goods

TRIVIA (ACADEMIC)

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

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

OTHER INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

The Investigative Abilities available to the players dictate the style of their investigation. The standard *Fear Itself* list given in this chapter is designed to support the game's concept of "skilled but ultimately ordinary people trying to grapple with supernatural horror." However, the GM can tailor the Investigative Ability list to match the style of investigation desired. For example, a one-shot game where all the player characters are medical professionals on staff in a hospital that's about to be overrun by infectious zombies might break **Investigative Procedure** and **Medicine** into more specialized skills, such as:

- **Chemistry**
- **Diagnosis**
- **Forensic Pathology**
- **Immunology**
- **Medical Imaging**
- **Surgical Procedure**
- **Pharmacology**

A campaign that's going to be set entirely in one small town might use different districts of the town as Investigative Abilities – **City Hall**, **The Docks**, **The Malls**, **Wrong Side of the Tracks**, **Suburbia**, and so forth. A game set in the trenches during World War I might add **Military Tactics** as an Academic Ability, **Scavenging** and **Explosive Devices** to the Technical list, and **Command** to the Interpersonal list. A campaign where the player characters are all ghost hunters could dig into techniques used by real world paranormal investigators, giving abilities like **Electronic Surveillance**, **Dowsing**, **Thermal Imaging**, and **Urban Exploration**.

Kenneth Hite's *Vendetta Run*, set in the Wild West, uses a radically different set of Investigative Abilities, including **Book Learning**, **Carousing**, **Courtroom Talk**, **Smooth Talk**, **Taunt**, and **Toadying** (and, for good measure, changes the General Abilities

too, adding **Gambling** and **Riding**, as well as expanded Shooting rules).

Even a small change to the list of abilities signals to players what the game's going to be about. If you add **Lucid Dreaming** as an ability, they'll know they're in for a very different game compared to one where you've highlighted **Military Tactics** or **Fallout Survival**.

CHOOSING ABILITIES

When you consider adding an ability, think about how it scores on the following criteria:

- **Usefulness:** How often might this ability come up in play? If the same ability comes up in every scene, it's probably a little too broad, and you should try chopping it up into several related abilities. An ability that comes up once or twice in every session is more appropriate – worth investing a few points in, but not so useful that every character *has* to take it.
- **Flexibility:** Can the ability turn up all sorts of different clues? Are there clear spends associated with the ability? Does the ability have connotations of a particular sort of person who might be a contact or ally for the player characters?
- **Distinctiveness:** How interesting is the ability? Does its presence say a lot about the sort of game this is going to be?

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

Sample Clues

- recall a newspaper or online article about a similar event
- recognize a local politician's face beneath the cowl of a cultist's hooded robe
- remember obscure ways to kill a vampire, according to various mythologies

Sample Benefits

- an unexpected competence at some unlikely task (*"Hey, I just remembered I'm an avid scuba diver, and have my tanks in the trunk of my car"*)
- recall an astoundingly obscure fact to impress or undercut a GM character (*"I think you'll find that the strangely bloodied weapon in the display case is a Bohemian ear-spoon, not a poleax."*)

GENERAL ABILITIES

Investigative Abilities reliably give the clues and information that the investigators need to delve deeper into the mystery. General Abilities come into play when there's risk and uncertainty — you use them when rolling dice. We get into the detail of the rules for tests, contests, and combat later in this chapter (p. 36), but the basic mechanic is always:

1. **Spend any number of points from the relevant General Ability.**
2. **Roll an ordinary six-sided die.**
3. **Add the number of points spent to the number rolled on the die.**
4. **If the total is higher than or equal to a Difficulty Number set by the GM, you succeed. If it's lower than the Difficulty, you fail, and something bad happens to you.**

The GM may choose to conceal the Difficulty Number you need to beat, especially in a situation where you can't take the time to properly gauge the scale of the challenge. As a general rule of thumb, though, most tests are Difficulty 4, giving you a 50% chance of succeeding if you don't spend any points.

If you have no rating in a General Ability (that is, you have chosen to put no build points into it), you cannot

make a test with that ability, with the exception of Shooting and Scuffling (p. 36). That is not to say you can't do the thing at all; it's only if you want to attempt something requiring a test that you won't succeed.

Your character might be able to drive, but with a Driving rating of 0, you will not be able to deal with a car chase or potential crash. A zero pool in an ability with a positive rating allows you to make a test — you just won't have points to spend.

ATHLETICS

Athletics allows you to perform general acts of physical derring-do, from running to jumping to dodging falling or oncoming objects. Any physical action not covered by another ability probably falls under the rubric of Athletics. The exception is running away, which is covered by the Fleeing ability (see p. 34).

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

DRIVING

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

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

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

FILCH

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

- pilfer items from under the noses of those watching you
- pick pockets
- plant objects on unsuspecting subjects

Fear Itself

FLEEING

Running away is integral to the horror genre; in *Fear Itself*, your characters will be doing a great deal of it. In keeping with genre conventions, you can be very good at running away without being any good at other physical tasks. So Fleeing becomes an ability unto itself, which you can use as a substitute for Athletics when escaping during chase sequences. It does not make you any better at pursuit.

If you're playing a non-combat-oriented character, and the GM agrees, you may be able to buy rating points in Fleeing at a reduced rate. If your Fleeing rating is more than twice your Athletics rating, you can buy any additional points in Fleeing at a reduced rate, getting 2 rating points for each build point spent. Hence, if your Athletics is 0, all your Fleeing is half price. See p. 13 for an example.

HEALTH **NEW**

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

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "Exhaustion, Injury, and Gruesome Death," p. 42.

Unlike other General Abilities, Health can (and will) go below 0.

HIDING

You've a knack for finding places to hide yourself. You can:

- spot good places to conceal yourself
- stay very, very still and quiet
- hide objects
- search for hidden objects or secret spaces

Hiding doesn't cover moving silently — that's Infiltration.

If you're playing a non-combat-oriented character, and the GM agrees, you may be able to buy points in Hiding at a reduced rate. If your Hiding rating is more than twice your Infiltration rating, you can



buy any additional points in Hiding at a reduced rate, getting 2 rating points for each build point spent. Hence, if your Infiltration is 0, all your Hiding is half price. See p. 13 for an example.

INFILTRATION

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

- pick locks
- deactivate or evade security systems
- hide yourself
- find hidden objects
- move silently
- find suitable places for forced entry, and use them

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as it is for getting into them. Infiltration covers everything Hiding can do and more.

MECHANICS

You're good at building, repairing, and disabling devices, from classic pit-and-pendulum traps to DVD

players. Given the right components, you can create jury-rigged devices from odd bits of scrap. Mechanics doubles as an Investigative Ability when used to:

- evaluate the quality of work used to create an item
- determine the identity of a handmade item's maker by comparing with known work by that individual
- pick locks, if this is a Core Clue; otherwise, picking a lock requires a test

MEDIC

You can perform first aid on Hurt or Seriously Wounded individuals. First aid doesn't help those who still have a positive Health total.

Hurt (0 to -5 Health): You don't need to make a test when using Medic to restore Health — instead, you just spend Medic points from your pool, restoring 2 Health for every 1 Medic spent. For more on the use of this ability, see p. 42.

Seriously Wounded (-6 to -11): You can stabilize a Seriously Wounded individual by making a Difficulty 3 Medic test to stop them bleeding out. However, you can't restore Health to someone who's been Seriously Wounded — they need to recuperate over time in a hospital (see p. 42).

Medic doubles as an Investigative Ability when used to:

- guess at the type and origin of injuries, distinguish needle puncture wounds from bite marks, spot bruising caused by restraints

Medic doesn't imply you're a qualified physician or pharmacist — for that, you need Medicine (p. 29).

PREPAREDNESS

You expertly anticipate the needs of any situation by packing a kit bag with necessary gear. Assuming you have immediate access to your kit, you can produce whatever object the group needs to overcome an obstacle. You make a simple test (p. 37); if you succeed, you have the item you want. You needn't do this in advance of the adventure, but can dig into your kit bag (provided you're able to get to it) as the need arises.

Other abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first-aid kits; Photographers come with

cameras and accessories; if you have Shooting, you have a gun, and so on. Preparedness does not intrude into these territories. It covers general-purpose investigative equipment, plus oddball items that suddenly come in handy in the course of the story.

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

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

PREPAREDNESS AND ACTIONS

If the GM is comfortable with it, Preparedness can be extended to actions as well as items. A player could then use the ability to, for example, declare that his character religiously makes backups of his hard drive, so he still has a copy of an incriminating photo, even after the Mayor's goons trash his house; or that of course her character would have called ahead to her buddy the Park Ranger, so there's a car at the end of the forest track waiting to pick the team up — assuming they can outrun the werewolves.

If you've Prepared something that requires the use of another ability, you've got to make a test or spend that ability too.

In a one-shot, this use of Preparedness can result in a satisfying "reveal" that sets up the end of the adventure. (*"When the monster gets close to the truck, I shoot the flare gun. Remember all the propane tanks in the shed? Can I make a Preparedness test to have moved them all into the back of the truck earlier?" "Sure, but you'll still need to make a Shooting test to aim the flare gun."*)

Preparedness has to build on previously established elements of the story. A character who has never evinced any interest in the occult cannot use Preparedness to have a genuine, rare grimoire in his possession; similarly, unless the propane tanks were discovered and described earlier, it's an abuse of Preparedness to suddenly conjure a convenient explosive cache.

Preparedness gives you the tools to solve problems; it doesn't solve them for you.

Fear Itself

SCUFFLING

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

SENSE TROUBLE

This ability allows you to perceive (either with sight or other senses) potential hazards to yourself or others. For example, you can:

- hear the tread of a psycho killer as he sneaks up behind your cabin
- see a skulking figure hiding in the high weeds
- smell the vinegary, rotting odor given off by a creature of the Outer Dark, as it lies in wait behind the stairs
- spot the metal trapdoor hidden beneath the artfully scattered dead leaves
- have a bad feeling about that noise the car engine has been making since you left the rest stop

Players never know the Difficulty Numbers for Sense Trouble before deciding how many points to spend, even in games where GMs generously inform the players of other Difficulty Numbers. Players must blindly choose how much to spend. The GM does not roll in secret, so even a failed roll allows the group the sense that something is amiss. They just don't know exactly what this is. Think of it as the game system equivalent of tension-building eerie music in a horror movie.

GMs should never require the use of this General Ability to find clues to the mystery at hand. Instead, use Investigative Abilities, defaulting to Investigative Procedure when no ability seems more appropriate. Sense Trouble is for a scenario's action-oriented sequences.

SHOOTING

You are adept with firearms.

SHRINK

You can provide comfort, perspective, and solace to the mentally troubled. You may be a therapist or counselor, a priest or pastor, or just an empathetic and intuitive individual. (This ability might equally be called Rally Spirits, or Comforting, or Pep Talking.)

You can restore panicked characters to a state of calm, and treat any long-term mental illnesses they accrue in the course of their investigations.

Importantly, you can spend 1 Shrink point to restore 1 point of Stability to another character by talking to them and calming them down. If you've got time to work with your patient, and you're both safe and secure, then you can restore 2 Stability for every 1 Shrink spent.

You can also spend 2 Shrink points to snap someone out when they're Losing It (p. 46).

As an Investigative Ability, Shrink may be used to:

- spot when someone's acting strangely or out of character
- guess at psychological conditions or compulsions

Often, you'll need to use Reassurance or Bullshit Detector before Shrink comes into play.

STABILITY

Jarring or stressful events can exert a damaging psychological toll. A confrontation with supernatural manifestations of Unremitting Horror can provoke outright madness. Your Stability rating indicates your resistance to mental trauma.

You get Stability 1 for free.

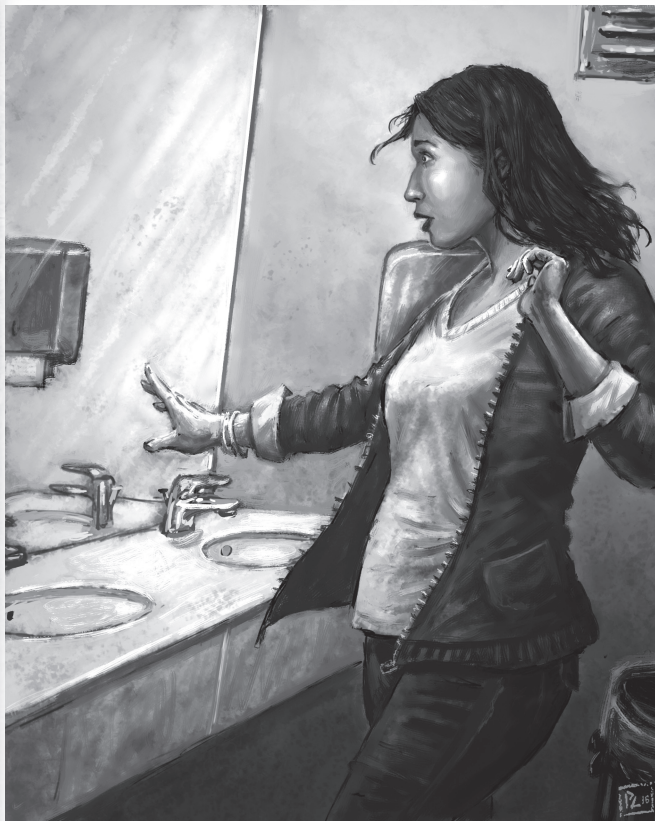
TESTS

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to General Abilities only. Unlike information-gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

The GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most General Ability uses should succeed automatically, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like Investigative Abilities.

A character can only make a test if they have a non-zero *rating* in that General Ability. It doesn't matter if the character has spent all the points in their pool and can't add to the roll — as long as they have some aptitude in that ability, they can make the test. Otherwise, the test automatically fails.

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



SIMPLE TESTS

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

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8, where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single six-sided die; if the result is equal to or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

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

Suzie wants to climb a high wall to get a good view of the librarian's garden, where a cult meeting may be going on. The GM needs the group to get to the other side of the wall and therefore assigns the relatively low Difficulty Number of 3 to the task. Suzie's player, Kira, has a full 8 points in her Athletics pool. She decides that she really needs a win on this one and decides to spend half of them on the attempt. She rolls a 5. With the 4 points from her pool, this gets a final result of 9. Displaying impressive aerobic grace, Suzie hauls herself over the wall.

Fear Itself is meant to be a straight-up and brutal horror game. Losing points is meant to hurt. To evoke that spirit faithfully, the GM should never reveal Difficulty Numbers. GMs running GUMSHOE in non-horror environments, or who wish to water down the setting's intentional level of oppressive nastiness, may choose to reveal Difficulties.

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

The player characters are traveling in a van, in hot pursuit of a cultist in a stolen car. Lucy has just failed her Driving test to keep control of the van as it goes skidding toward the edge of a wet mountain road. She spent 2 points from her Driving pool on this attempt. To justify a retest, Lucy says she'll slam on the brakes when she regains control – abandoning any chance of catching the car they're chasing. Now she must spend at least 3 Driving points. Fortunately she has 4 points left in her pool. The Difficulty Number of the attempt to regain control is 5. Lucy rolls a 6, adding 3 points to get a final result of 9. She manages to bring the van around just in time, coming within inches of the edge.

PIGGYBACKING

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the

Difficulty Numbers and Story Pacing

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

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cultists' house in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cultist assigned to patrol duty might be immersed in a popular novel, say.

Success at a Cost

Another approach is to have tests where victory is assumed, and the purpose of the test is to see how costly that success is. For example, if the characters have to get past a high wall, the GM could declare that the characters automatically scale the wall, but must still make Athletics tests to see if they get over it without injury. Those who pass the Athletics test get through without a scrape; those who fail lose a few points of Health. Similarly, you might allow the characters to automatically sneak into a building regardless of the results of their Infiltration check, but those who fail leave fingerprints behind or get spotted by a security camera.

Investigative Spends

Reducing the Difficulty Number of a test is a great reward for an Investigative spend. **Impersonate** might make it easier to sneak in with Infiltration; **Notice** might spot the perfect sniper's nest to make a shot with **Shooting**. **Science** could help with a **Medic** test.

leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

Suzie, Lucy, Russell, and Max attempt to sneak into the principal's house to root through his computer, which they are sure holds cult secrets. Russell, with an Infiltration of 8, takes the lead. Suzie, Lucy, and Max have 2, 0, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Suzie and Max pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Lucy has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left her behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but she's the one with the computing savvy.) Russell spends 3 points on the attempt and rolls a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty if it wasn't for Lucy's presence. Clearly, she's knocked over one of the plant stands in the hall...

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

COOPERATION

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

Russell and Max are trying to fix their broken-down car so they can escape in it before the flesh-hungry mountain cannibals catch up with them. Russell has 3 points left in his Mechanics pool. Max has 2 points. They decide that Russell is the main mechanic, and Max his assistant. Both choose to spend all of their remaining points on the attempt. Russell adds 3 points to the die roll. Max spends 2 points, but adds only 1 to the die roll. Russell's player rolls a 3, for a result of 7. This beats the Difficulty Number of 6, allowing them to start the engine and pull away as a crowd of ragged, dusty men come running down the slope, waving femurs and shouting angrily.

Making Hiding Tense

Mechanically, hiding from danger is a Hiding test. The character needs something to hide behind or under. A good hiding place (possibly found with an Investigative Ability like Notice or Outdoor Survival) reduces the Difficulty of the Hiding test by 1.

The Difficulty is also modified by the opponent's Awareness Modifier (see p. 81), and the player doesn't know the value of this modifier. That means that the player may not be sure whether or not the test was successful on a middling result — for example, if the base Difficulty was 4 and the player got a total of 5, then the hiding attempt is only successful as long as the hunter's Awareness Modifier is +0 or less.

In such a situation, before revealing whether or not the player hid successfully, the GM should offer the opportunity to flee. If the player chooses to leave the hiding place and flee, it starts a chase. If the player stays hidden, and the test failed, then the character is discovered and is now in combat.

CONTESTS

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

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

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

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

Suzie flees through the empty school from the gym teacher, a cultist who is pursuing her with a nail-studded baseball bat. Her Athletics pool is 6; the gym teacher's is 7. As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, she's the first character to act. She rolls against a Difficulty of 4, spending 1 point. She rolls a 4, and manages to advance toward the dining hall.

The gym teacher spends 1 point as well, rolling a 3. He lumbers through the echoing corridors, swinging his bat.

Suzie spends another point, taking her Athletics pool to 4. She rolls a 2. That's not enough to get away. Suzie has backed herself into a corner, pinned between rows of lockers. The gym teacher advances on her. Now she has no choice but to stand and fight.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap gets a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant — for example, a character running through a swamp finds it harder to move quickly than the marsh creature pursuing him. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the marsh beast gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

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

FIGHTING

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving the following abilities:

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

The aggressor is the first character to move against the other. When the status of

MAKING CHASES EXCITING

Both GM and players should narrate their actions along with the dice rolling. Fleeing characters might topple obstacles behind them, dive through windows, stumble and slip along icy paths, or throw themselves over cars to escape. Pursuers might lope along like wolves, smash through barriers, or attempt to claw their prey but miss by inches.

RAISES

Optionally, the fleeing character may raise the Difficulty of their own test to raise the Difficulty of the pursuer's next test by the same amount. This represents taking the chase through more challenging terrain.

Suzie, still pursued by that psychotic gym teacher, scrambles out onto the roof of the school's assembly hall. The metal roof is rain-slick and perilous. The Difficulty for Suzie's next test is increased by +2 to Difficulty 6, but if she passes that test, the gym teacher will then have to pass his own Difficulty 6 test.

INVESTIGATIVE SPENDS

Investigative Abilities can be used to reduce the Difficulty of a test during a chase. Each Investigative

spend from a suitable Ability lowers the Difficulty by 1 for one test. Possible examples:

- **Notice:** spotting a short cut across a rooftop
- **Intimidation:** shouting at people to get out of your way
- **Streetwise:** knowing the city's backstreets
- **Photography:** momentarily blinding your pursuers with a flash from your camera

PROLONGED CHASES

A basic contest where the first to fail a test loses works perfectly for quick, breathless foot chases. If the chase is a major part of the adventure (for example, the player characters are hunting down a monster, or there's an action-packed car chase), then increase the required margin of victory. A participant might only lose the chase after failing two or even three more tests than their opponent.

UNRELENTING PURSUIT

For chases where the investigators are being pursued by a slow but relentless monster, lower the Difficulty but have the investigators make three tests for every one made by their pursuer. This models the creature's methodical, unstoppable pursuit. If the investigators fail any tests, then the monster catches them.

aggressor and defender are unclear, the combatants compare their current pool numbers in the abilities they're using in the fight. The character with the highest number chooses whether to act as aggressor or defender. (Unlike an ordinary contest, in a fight it is often advantageous to strike first.)

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

Hit Thresholds: Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more). The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to strike its target. Less competent GM characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures

may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

Running Away: Fleeing from an ongoing melee requires an Athletics or Fleeing test. The Difficulty is 3 + the number of foes you're escaping from (4 for one enemy, 5 for two, and so on; especially large foes or cramped conditions may raise the Difficulty). If you succeed, then you break out of the melee, and it becomes a chase scene. Your opponents must make the first roll in the chase contest.

If you fail, then either you're automatically hit by one of your foes, or one of your foes may spend 3 Athletics to block the exit and prevent further escape attempts. If the foe goes for the free hit, then you break free of the melee (assuming you're still standing), but your enemies are right on your heels and you have to roll first in the ensuing chase.

Fighting Without Abilities

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

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

You automatically do an additional -2 damage.

You must declare your action at the beginning of each round, and cannot change it if the tactical situation alters.

You automatically go last in each round.

If you're using a firearm, a roll of 1 means you have accidentally shot yourself or one of your allies, as selected (or rolled randomly) by the GM. Do damage as normal (including your automatic -2 penalty).

Dealing Damage: When you roll equal to or above your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die that is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE	DAMAGE MODIFIER
Punch, kick	-2
Small improvised weapon, police baton, knife	-1
Machete, heavy club, light firearm	0
Sword, heavy firearm	+1

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

Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high Damage Modifiers.

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

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less (see sidebar on page 42), that combatant collapses from exhaustion and is unable to continue fighting. Any combatants currently engaged with the fallen character in a close quarters fight can then deal another instance of damage to their victim.

Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become Seriously Wounded — see sidebar on page 42.

Russell is attacked in his own bedroom by a stinking, ragged-taloned creature that has formed itself from the rotten trash in the drains. It leaps on him, making this a close quarters fight, for which the Scuffling ability is required. The GM declares that the creature is the aggressor, since it's come out of nowhere to attack the sleeping Russell. The creature has a Scuffling rating and pool of 12, a Health rating and pool of 10, a Hit Threshold of 4, and a Damage Modifier of 2. Russell's Scuffling rating is 10 but his pool is down to 6. His Health pool is down to 8 from a rating of 12. His Hit Threshold is 4. With no weapons at hand, his Damage Modifier is -2.

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

He flails at its shifting visage with white-knuckled fists. His player, David, spends 3 Scuffling points, taking his pool from 6 to 3. He rolls a 3, for a result of 6, which beats the creature's Hit Threshold. He therefore deals damage to it. David rolls a 5. Combined with his -2 Modifier, this comes out to 3 points of damage. The creature's Health pool drops from 10 to 7.

The creature responds by attempting to tear open Russell's abdomen to pull out his entrails. The GM

EXHAUSTION, INJURY AND GRUESOME DEATH

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

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness roll. Roll a die with the absolute value¹ of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool *before* you make this reduction.

Russell T. Jones is being chased by pretty coed cannibals through the rooms of a spacious beachfront property. They hit him with a harpoon, dropping his Health pool to -2. He really wants to get away from them, lest they barbecue him and serve him up at tonight's slumber party. Thus he must remain conscious. The absolute value of -2 is 2, so this is the Difficulty of his Consciousness roll. He chooses to expend another 2 Health points he doesn't have, pushing himself onward toward the front door. That gives him a bonus of 2 to his roll. He rolls a 6, for a final result of 8. Russell gets away, but now his Health pool is down to -4.

HURT (0 TO -5 HEALTH)

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are Hurt, but have suffered no permanent injury, only a few superficial cuts and bruises. However, the pain from your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on Investigative Abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1.

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

SERIOUSLY WOUNDED (-6 TO -11 HEALTH)

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

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

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

Dead (-12 Health)

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

¹ In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.

spends another 2 Scuffling points for the creature, taking its pool from 10 to 8. The roll is high, a 5, which modifies to a 7. The ensuing damage roll is a 2, which the creature's Damage Modifier brings to a total of 4. Russell's Health drops to -2. He is now Hurt, and suffers an increase of 1 to all Difficulty Numbers, including his opponent's Hit Threshold, which now becomes 5. He must make a Consciousness roll against a Difficulty of 2, which is the absolute value of his Health pool. He rolls a 3, and remains conscious.

Now it's Russell's turn to hit back. David spends 2 points, reducing his pool from 3 to 1. He rolls a 2, for a total of 4. Before he got hurt, that would have been enough, but now he's just short of the mark. He tries to clutch at the creature's neck, but his fingers skid and slip on loose matter and slimy hair.

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

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

Russell is Seriously Wounded and will die if not stabilized. Fortunately, Max has had first aid training and can stop the bleeding with his Medic ability. A long convalescence now awaits the unlucky Russell.

FREE-FOR-ALL COMBAT

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent. The GM abandons the aggressor/defender

model, and instead determines an order of action using whatever method she prefers:

- Ranking all participants in the combat according to their current *rating* values in the fighting skills they'll be starting the fight with - Scuffling or Shooting. Ties are broken in favor of characters with higher *pools remaining* in those skills. If characters are still tied, player characters win out over creatures and enemies, and early-arriving players win over late-arriving players. (Favors highly skilled combatants)
- Ranking all participants in the combat based on the physical seating of the players at the table, starting at the GM's left and moving around clockwise. (Easy to track)
- Allowing each participant to nominate who gets to act next, once the current action is completed. (Flexible and friendly)
- Any of the above, but Creatures of Unremitting Horror get to interrupt the sequence at the GM's whim. (Emphasizes helplessness and unnatural violation of order.)

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins. When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons. Some supernatural creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy.

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

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above.

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

Fear Itself

Surprise

Player characters are surprised when they find themselves suddenly in a dangerous situation. Avoid being surprised with a successful Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Stealth Modifier. Player characters surprise GM characters by sneaking up on them with a successful Infiltration or Sense Trouble test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Alertness Modifier (see p. 81). Surprised characters suffer a +2 increase to the Difficulty of all General Ability tests for any immediately subsequent action. In a fight, the penalty pertains to the first round of combat.

ARMOR

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. Characters in *Fear Itself* are unlikely to own or use armor, but rules are given here just in case.

If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points, and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points.

Lucy's dad Stanley, the group's resident combat and investigative expert, is shot by one of the cultist teachers from his daughter's school. The GM rolls a 3 for the cultist's damage, adding 1 point for his high-caliber handgun, for a total damage of 4. Stanley wears light body armor, reducing the damage to 2 points. His Health pool decreases from 6 to 4.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Characters can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT team. Also, most genres of horror don't empower the characters to fight their antagonists with military-grade weapons! Unless the story specifically allows for it, *Fear Itself* characters should not encounter military levels of weapons or armor. Ransacking

One Gun, Two Combatants

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

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

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

the attic to find an uncle's old army kit is fine; going after the Bad Things with Uzis and flak jackets is not.

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

COVER

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

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

Partial Cover: About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

Full Cover: Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

AMMO CAPACITY

GUMSHOE sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots. (If you want a harder rule, then you've got to reload when you roll a natural 1, but you can spend a point of Shooting to automatically reload instantaneously.)

Optionally, the GM can declare that a character who's fired several shots in a row needs to reload. When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round. A kind GM might allow a 2-point Shooting refresh after reloading.

On the run from a horde of cultists as the sun begins to set, a wounded Mitchell crawls into the opening of a storm drain to hole up. Unfortunately for him, a trio of Blood Corpses is lurking nearby, and they have his scent. The GM decides that limited resources will increase the sequence's sense of terror, and declares that Mitchell has only four shots left in his handgun, and only one extra ammo clip in his pocket. She plans to have the Blood Corpses gang up on him, forcing him to make a Shooting test to successfully reload as they rush him.

RANGE

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range limit for rifles is one hundred meters. Keep distances loose and impressionistic; a corridor feels much, much longer when there's a monster chasing you down it, and that applies to firearms too.

STABILITY TESTS

Even non-supernatural effects can prove emotionally destabilizing. Every violent encounter puts you at risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Any confrontation with the supernatural can cut away at the foundations of rationality.

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

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

GMs should feel free to determine Stability losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, up close, or when ripping your lungs out. When a Stability test is called for, a Stability test with a potential loss of 4 points is described as "a 4-point Stability test."

Here's a Stability test in action:

Suzie's current Stability is 8. While watching the neighbor's house through her curtains after dark, she sees a squat, inhuman figure lope across the lawn and vanish behind a bush. Like any other Stability test, Suzie's player, Kira, will be trying to beat a Difficulty of 4. Confident that this mere glimpse of a creature constitutes only a minor brush with destabilizing weirdness, Kira elects to spend only 1 point to bolster her roll. Alas, she rolls a 1, for a result of 2, two lower than the Difficulty Number. Having failed, she suffers a Stability loss of 3. Having spent 1 point on her bonus and lost another 3 to the failure, Suzie's new Stability pool value is 4.

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

Suzie and her friend Daniel are wading through the water down at the old abandoned railway tunnel, searching by flashlight for signs of a suspected cult. Animated corpses lurch up from beneath the water to attack them. Suzie blazes away with her father's pistol,

INCIDENT	STABILITY LOSS
You encounter something unsettling or even inexplicable that is not obviously dangerous (strange lights in the sky, strange sounds at night, an eerie coincidence, such as your name on a gravestone).	1
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm.	2
You have a disturbing experience that you cannot account for, with mental effects only (missing time, strange compulsions, nightmares).	2
You're in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury.	2
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill.	3
A friend or loved one vanishes or viciously turns on you.	3
You see a supernatural creature from a distance.	3 or more
You see a supernatural creature up close.	4 or more
You're assaulted by supernatural visions or waking dreams.	3
You have a disturbing experience that you cannot account for, and that leaves physical evidence (bizarre physical changes, mysterious scars, proof you were abducted in your sleep, evidence of your tainted ancestry).	3
You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene.	4
You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed.	4
You are the subject of psychic assault.	4
You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one.	6
You are attacked by a supernatural creature.	7
You see a friend or loved one killed.	7
You see a friend or loved one killed in a particularly gruesome manner.	8

driving off the creatures, but not before they tear Daniel open in front of her eyes, pulling him limb from limb, like dogs savaging a rag toy. Her player, Kira, makes a single roll, with a potential Stability loss of 8, the worst of several pertaining to the incident.

Groups craving an additional level of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character who has had extensive training in treating injuries might,

Panicking

A character who suffers a Stability loss can choose to panic in response. Panicking reduces the Stability loss by 1, since the character blots out the direct experience of the traumatic event. The downside is that the character is now panicked and acting irrationally — they must fight (Scuffling) or flee (Fleeing). The panicked episode lasts for the rest of the scene, or until someone else spends Shrink to snap the panicked victim out of their condition.

for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a better chance against car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0. Unlike Health, the results of negative Stability vary from game to game, and even from person to person.

LOSING IT (−1 TO −5 STABILITY)

When you Lose It, you're affected by one of the negative conditions described below. Depending on your game, either

the *player* picks the condition, the *GM* picks it, or you roll a die to choose randomly. Player choice gives the player more control and lets the player decide how cruel they want to be. GM choice often connects better with the overall story, because the GM has more information available and can make a more informed choice in terms of narrative. Random choice is unpredictable and surprising for all concerned. In all cases, the player decides how to portray the character's increasing stress and psychological disintegration. Some monsters may have particular effects associated with a victim Losing It.

1. **Shaken:** You're terrified, heart pumping, knees quivering. You can't think straight. You can't spend points from your Investigative Ability pools. Difficulty Numbers for all General Ability tests increase by 1. This condition lasts until you get back to 0 or more Stability.
2. **Panicked:** You're in flight mode, and are likely to do something very stupid and ill-considered, because you're running on pure instinct. A cruel GM might even ask for suggestions on what your character would do while panicked (*"Would Sarah remember that she's holding a loaded gun when she panics? Maybe she drops it and it goes off!"*) A state of panic lasts for the rest of the scene, or until someone spends Shrink to snap you out of it.
3. **Closed Off:** You're losing the ability to connect with people. The normal world is just a buzzing noise in your ears. Lose a number of points from your Interpersonal pools equal to the absolute value of your Stability (so, if you're at -5 Stability, lose 5 points).
4. **Exposed:** You're distracted, shaky, or too frazzled to stay on top of everything, and something's about to snap. The GM decides what goes wrong. Think of this as the Sword of Damocles hanging over your head — at some point soon, the stress is going to result in something going horribly wrong for you. Some possibilities:
 - You're automatically hit by a monster's attack. The GM can declare this *after* failing an attack roll, because the universe is fundamentally hostile.
 - You automatically fail a key test. The GM declares that you're going to fail before you roll, so you know there's no use in spending points on it.
 - The GM runs a really nasty Directed Scene involving your character (*"In this scene, Sarah's going to alienate her family by refusing their help because they can't understand what she's seen"*).
 - The GM prompts you to make a decision that's contrary to your character's best interest (*"How about you go to the haunted house on your own, instead of waiting until the others get back from the library?"*)
 - If you can get back to 0 or more Stability before the GM takes the opportunity to inflict badness on you, then you're no longer Exposed.
5. **Blackout:** Maybe you faint. Maybe you can't remember what happened next. Maybe the camera cuts away. Either way, the scene's over for you. If you're the only PC present, then the GM narrates where you turn up next. If there are other characters around, then

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you're knocked out, stunned, dragged away, or otherwise removed from the action for the rest of the scene.

6. **Berserk:** Something in you says "Fight" instead of "Flight," and you attack! If there's an obvious threat nearby, you'll attack that. Otherwise you target whatever most reminds you of the thing that triggered your breakdown. You use whatever your highest combat pool is (Scuffling or Shooting), and automatically spend 2 points on each attack until your pool runs dry (or you kill your target, or you're talked down with Shrink).

Once you're brought back up to 0 or more Stability, you're no longer Losing It.

SHATTERED (-6 TO -11 STABILITY)

If you go below -6 Stability, you're Shattered. As with Losing It, the effects of being Shattered vary from character to character and game to game, but the big difference is that the effects of being Shattered last much, much longer — see "Psychological Treatment," p. 49.

Again, depending on your group and game, the effects can be chosen by the player, the GM, or at random.

1. **Distorted Reality:** Your ability to distinguish between what's real and what's not is broken. Depending on the player and the group, this may manifest as:
 - The GM describing what your character perceives, which isn't necessarily the same as what's actually happening ("*You see a monster rushing toward you — is it really there, or are you actually hallucinating and that's one of your friends coming to help you? Do you fire your gun or not?*")
 - The player picking an obsession or other psychological disorder for the character, and roleplaying that condition until they recover.
 - Head games, as described in the sidebar on p. 49.
2. **Nightmares:** You start to suffer from recurrent nightmares and flashbacks to your traumatic experience. The Difficulty for all future Stability tests related to whatever horror dropped you to Shattered rises by +2.

3. **Through the Veil:** In a game involving supernatural horror, your unstable state of mind makes you especially sensitive to unnatural entities and influences. You can see and sense things that are invisible to other people — and they can see you. You're a target for the Outer Dark. In game terms, the monsters always know roughly where you are — you can hide, but you can never escape them.

4. **Incapacitated:** You're barely functional. You might be sobbing uncontrollably, shaking violently, or just want to curl up in a ball and never come out. Difficulty Numbers for all General Ability tests increase by 3. This penalty drops to 1 when your Stability rises above -6, but it lingers as long as you have this condition.

5. **Despairing:** There's no hope — you've got to get out of here. For the rest of the adventure, your primary goal is escape, not solving the mystery. If this comes into conflict with your Risk Factors, then you must spend the Stability to ignore the Risk Factor and keep on running.

6. **Blackout... With Teeth:** As per the Losing It effect of Blackout, but when you wake up, you find you've done something abhorrent or callous in order to survive, such as sacrificing another player character to the monsters. As long as you've got this condition, you'll Blackout whenever you Lose It in future, as your worst self takes charge to keep you alive.

GONE (-12 STABILITY)

Once you hit -12 Stability, your character is out of the game. Choose one of the following ways to go. This is *always* player choice, not GM choice, or randomly determined.

- **Lost:** Your mind's so badly damaged that you can't function. You might be permanently catatonic, lost in the labyrinth of your own nightmarish memories, or completely unable to act rationally. Whatever the symptoms of your particular case, you're not a viable player character any more.
- **Turned:** The corrosive tendrils of the Outer Dark have wormed their way into your mind and corrupted it. Either you die of sheer terror, or else

HEAD GAMES (OPTIONAL RULE)

Some groups find the following optional rule rewarding and entertaining; others may find it unpleasant and manipulative. Discuss such concerns openly with the group before deciding whether to use this optional rule in your game. In particular, you should only use this approach if the player of the Shattered character understands what it entails and is enthusiastic about it. Make it clear that players in this position can opt out at any time, and roleplay using the default rules if they are not comfortable.

For games where the players enjoy playfully tormenting one another, and where the GM wants a note of confusion and paranoia, consider recruiting the other players as helpers in portraying crumbling stability. Arrange these tricks beforehand with your coconspirator players, and put them into action when a player character drops below -6 Stability.

- The other players and GM decide that a mundane detail of the world is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated, or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.

- The GM takes the player aside, reveals that one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells the afflicted player just how to kill the monster.
- When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of the ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. Then the GM describes the real results to the other players, and invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.
- At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if it was an entirely different person.
- The player leaves the room, and other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.
- The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. Perhaps the character is married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously wrote a best-selling book. People often refer to this new, verifiable fact of which the character is unaware.

you snap and start emulating or serving the creatures of the Outer Dark, becoming a monstrous character under the Game Moderator's control.

- **Checking Out:** You've lost all hope and reason to live. The next time you would have to make a Consciousness roll, your character dies from the injury instead of hanging on until -12 Health. Alternatively, if an opportunity to sacrifice yourself or commit suicide in a dramatic fashion arises, grab it.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRIAGE

A character with the Shrink ability can spend points from that pool to help another character regain spent Stability points. For every Shrink point spent, the recipient gains 1 Stability point.

If both characters are safe and calm, and have an extended period of several hours in which to talk, relax and reflect, then Shrink is even more effective, restoring 2 Stability points for every point of Shrink spent.

If a character is acting in an erratic manner due to mental illness or panic, another character can spend 2 points of Shrink to snap the afflicted victim into a state of temporary lucidity, allowing them to act rationally for the remainder of the current scene.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT

The effects of being Shattered can be cured through prolonged treatment using the Shrink ability. At the beginning of each scenario, in a prologue scene, the character administering the treatment makes a Shrink test (Difficulty 4.) After 3 consecutive successful tests,

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Modes of Terror and Madness

Fear Itself is about ordinary people, not heroes, so the effects of physical damage don't vary much from game to game. Guns are always dangerous; injuries always painful. *Fear Itself* doesn't try to tell the sort of stories where square-jawed heroes or surprisingly tough cheerleaders go toe-to-toe with monsters.

The effects of psychological damage, though, should reflect the style of horror story you want to tell. If you're going for a slasher horror game, then getting scared means screaming and running into the darkness. In a game of creeping cosmic horror, then you want a slower slide toward terrible revelation. In some games, losing the ability to connect with your loved ones and Sources of Stability is a terrible blow — in others, supporting GMCs are largely irrelevant. Choose your psychological consequences appropriately.

As a rule of thumb...

SLASHER HORROR	COSMIC TERROR
Losing It: Panicked, Exposed Shattered: Nightmares, Through the Veil Gone: Checking Out	Losing It: Shaken, Blackout Shattered: Nightmares, Through the Veil Gone: Lost
SURREAL PSYCHODRAMA	SORDID AND GRITTY
Losing It: Exposed, Blackout Shattered: Distorted Reality, Nightmares Gone: Turned, Checking Out	Losing It: Closed Off, Exposed Shattered: Distorted Reality, Through the Veil Gone: Lost, Turned

That said, presentation is everything. There's no reason why someone can't panic in a surreal game, or have an amnesiac blackout in a psychodrama.

and 3 consecutive scenarios in which the patient remains above 0 Stability at all times, the effect goes away. If the character having the treatment drops below 0 Stability in a scenario during the treatment, the "treatment counter" resets, and they will need another set of 3 successful Shrink tests, ending each scenario with a positive Stability, to cure the condition.

However, if the character ever again becomes Shattered, the condition returns, and a permanent cure becomes impossible.

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

RISK FACTORS AND STABILITY

If characters in horror movies were run by roleplayers, there would be no horror. No one would go down into the sub-basement, read incantations found in moldy tomes, or take a shower with a known maniac on the loose.

Your Risk Factors encourage you to abandon the flinty rationality of a player controlling a game piece. They give your characters the same unruly impulses and emotional entanglements that inspire real people to make dumb choices — which they do on a regular basis.

Your GM will tell you when you find your Risk Factor impelling you to irrationally heedless action. When in doubt, she'll explain exactly what you have to do to satisfy your impulse. You're never obligated to obey it. By exerting unusual force of will, you can control your behavior. At a price.

Sometimes your GM will refer to your Risk Factor in her scenario, as a means of moving the plot ahead and getting you into trouble. This is referred to as a **Hard Risk Factor**. Whenever you resist a Hard Risk Factor, you lose either 4 Stability points or one-third of your Stability pool, whichever is greater. The GM is always empowered to specify a Risk Factor as Hard if they choose to.

On other occasions, a situation tangential to the main storyline would logically trigger your self-destructive tendencies or dangerous emotional vulnerabilities. This

Using Sources of Stability

Consider the following optional rule, which can also be combined with the standard mental effects rules. It means that Stability loss will affect PC behavior much earlier, but it can be great fun to play.

Stability loss affects a character's relationship with their Sources of Stability, whether people, personality traits, or hobbies. For every 6 Stability points, 1 Source of Stability is affected. The player should choose the most appropriate one. This instability should manifest as changes in behavior, or in relationship problems. For example, an artist might suffer from trembling fingers when painting, or a character might become distant and cold toward a wife or husband.

is called a **Soft Risk Factor**. It costs you 2 Stability points to resist a Soft Risk Factor.

In neither case do you get to roll Stability to avoid the loss. It is automatic.

REGAINING POOL POINTS

PCs can restore depleted abilities in many different ways. Players – keep an eye out for such opportunities, and remind your GM whenever you think you deserve a refresh.

Havens: Whenever the PCs are able to create a temporary haven for themselves in which they're free from danger and horror manifestations for an hour or more, they may refresh up to 3 General Abilities, except for Health and Stability. They lose all refreshed points if their supposed place of safety is penetrated or reveals itself as a place of hazard. The characters get only one opportunity for this accelerated refreshment per session.

Shrink: Use of the Shrink ability and achievement of emotionally significant goals (see below) permit limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between stories. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time associating with the

people and carrying out the activities that serve as the character's Sources of Stability.

Sources of Stability: Reconnecting with a Source of Stability can refresh 2 points of Stability.

Indulging Risk: If a player voluntarily indulges a Risk Factor in a way that endangers or inconveniences their character or another player character (like getting drunk when you're supposed to be watching out for monsters), that refreshes 2 points of Stability.

Rest: The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization; see p. 42.)

Medic: Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session, but only to Hurt characters.

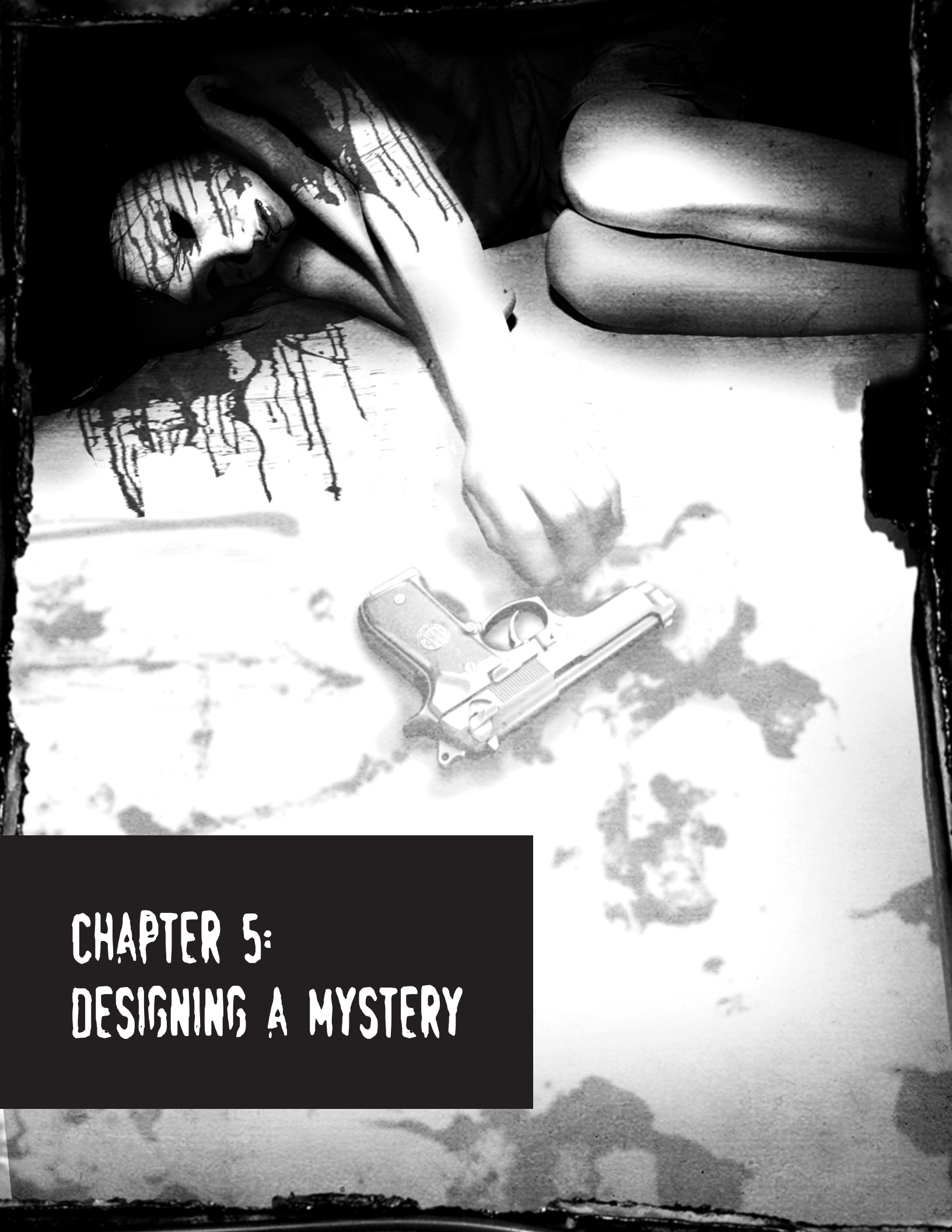
Automatic Refreshes: Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Fleeing, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever 24 hours of game-world time has elapsed since the last expenditure. Other General Abilities refresh at the end of each game, like Investigative Abilities.

STABILITY GAINS

In a game of emotional horror, PCs may regain lost Stability points by helping supporting characters to feel a sense of safety, serenity, or acceptance in the face of horror or catastrophe. They may provide purely emotional solace, or actively work to rescue a supporting character from danger. Although the characters may gain information or move toward completion of a goal by providing this aid, their actions must be selfless, or go above and beyond their obligations, to qualify for this reward.

In some instances, especially impressive investigative feats may bolster a PC's Stability by restoring his confidence. This reward is especially appropriate in the case of point spends suggested by the players.

When a PC qualifies for a Stability gain, the player rolls a die and adds the result to his Stability pool. The pool never increases beyond the character's Stability rating.



**CHAPTER 5:
DESIGNING A MYSTERY**

This chapter advises the Game Moderator on how to plan a *Fear Itself* adventure for a group of players. For more advice, check out the chapters on *One-Shots* (p. 100), *Miniseries* (p. 132), and *Campaigns* (p. 155) for notes on how the length of a series affects design and play.

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists, which usually draws the player characters directly into the action. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities. If you use the GUMSHOE rules for straight-up crime drama, the team investigates a crime, finds out who did it, and puts the culprits under arrest.

In the Unremitting Horror setting, the group is placed in danger due to the actions of malevolent humans, supernatural entities, or most commonly both. They may need to find a way to thwart or even kill the human antagonists. Despite their relative lack of field experience, they may have to destroy any supernatural creatures or effects generated by the bad guys. Or they might end up involving the police, the media, or the military, having finally found enough evidence to convince them.

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

The investigation trigger. This is the event, often a gruesome crime, that plunges the player characters into the action and prompts them to begin an investigation. Examples:

- A school friend of all the player characters is found murdered, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing. (Scream)
- On a camping holiday or a trip into the woods, one of the group vanishes under sinister circumstances. (The Blair Witch Project)
- A friend or relative goes missing, with strange clues left behind. Nobody but the players suspects anything is amiss. (Absentia)

Mundane Mysteries

The scenario structure given in the main text assumes you're using the Unremitting Horror background, or a similar setting for occult investigation.

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

- A teacher or other authority figure begins to behave strangely, and one of the players discovers evidence of bizarre rites. (The Faculty)
- Sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena, which adults and authorities dismiss. (Every 1950s teen horror flick ever made)
- The apparently mundane death of a friend or family member, who entrusted a terrifying secret to one of the players. (Ring)

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

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villains' point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and

its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of **Antagonist Reactions**. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. This may include further horrific crimes, intended to terrify the characters into staying well away. They may try to set the authorities against the characters, or have them carted off to mental hospitals. They may attack the players. Foolish, overconfident, or risk-taking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.

INSPIRATION

Horror isn't a mechanical process. While generic horror imagery can be assembled into a perfectly functional game ("the dead rise, and you're

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all trapped in a creepy hospital that's besieged by zombies"), you should look within yourself for what disturbs and thrills you. This initial inspiration is likely to be a single image, concept, or even a mood that you want to evoke in the players. For example:

- a crumbling house sinking into the mud
- an eyeball in a bathroom sink
- meeting a dead relative who doesn't seem to realize they've passed on
- the unwholesome feeling of a particular graffiti-covered underpass near your old high school

Start with those images, and imagine some interesting set-piece scenes associated with them that might show up in a game. (Writing them on note-cards may prove useful.)

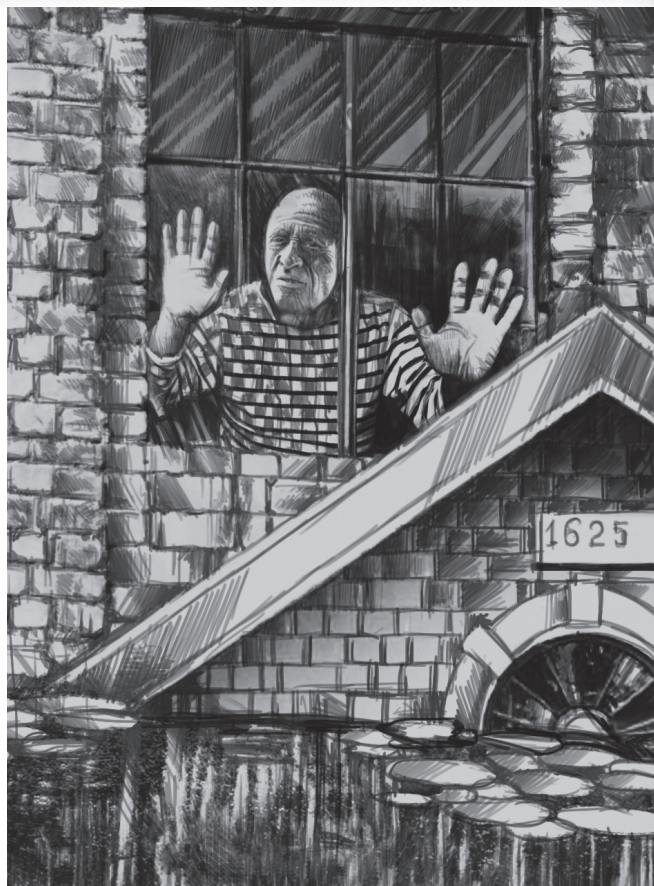
- For the sinking house, someone might be trapped in it as it submerges. You imagine them beating against an upstairs window as the mud swallows the house, their hands leaving muddy prints on the unyielding glass.
- Whose eyeball is it? How did it get there? Why isn't there any blood? Is it in a pristine white marble sink, scrubbed and sanitized, or in some filthy, rusted sink in a run-down tenement?
- Here, the horror isn't just meeting the dead; it's the terrible burden of having to tell someone that they're dead (and doing it without screaming). Maybe the players have to carefully interrogate a ghost about a murder without letting slip that they're asking about the last moments of the ghost's former life.
- What causes that unwholesome feeling? Is it haunted? Does it echo some horrible crime? Is the underpass a gateway into some alien world?

At this stage, just think about things that scare you. Creep yourself out. Story and structure come later — first, find that fear.

STRUCTURE

A straightforward investigation can be seen as a series of scenes arranged in a straight line, with multiple ways to move from each scene to the one following it. Improvisation consists of reacting to the players by switching the order of scenes around, or interpolating new scenes.

The looser structure of a *Fear Itself* scenario still consists of an investigative line, in which the characters



pursue a series of Core Clues until they achieve a resolution of some sort. This is called the **spine**. In your notes, it can consist of large sections of fleshed-out narrative, or a barebones list of the elements that need to occur to comprise a minimally satisfying narrative. Surrounding this rudimentary spine are any number of **confrontational scenes**, in which any of the following can happen:

- The antagonists (human or otherwise) make an aggressive assault on the lives or sanity of their targets, whether these are the PCs, recurring members of the series' supporting cast, or supporting characters involved only in the current scenario.
- One or more PCs pursue their personal goals.
- A flashback (see p. 67) reveals new information about one of the leading characters.

Confrontational scenes can be even looser than the spine. In your notes, they can consist of carefully detailed prose descriptions. However, unless you're preparing an adventure for someone else to run, you're probably better off with rudimentary point form notes. Write as much

or as little as you're comfortable with, but always keep in mind that these confrontational scenes are optional and may not actually take place. Don't waste effort on tangents and side treks the players are unlikely to explore.

CORE SCENES

The GUMSHOE system organizes and connects scenes by means of Core Clues. Stripped down, every scene in the spine needs:

- A lead-in from the previous scene
- A Core Clue that points to the next scene
- A lead-out to the next scene

(A spine doesn't have to be linear. You can have branches that link back up later on. For example, one scene might have three Core Clues, and hence three lead-outs pointing to three potential next scenes.)

Take your half-formed ideas. Decide on an order that makes for the most compelling story.

EYEBALL IN SINK
GHOST
SPOOKY UNDERPASS
SINKING HOUSE

The eyeball is clearly an investigative scene, and you want to have the first few scenes be primarily investigative. The ghost can show up and give information leading toward the climax of the investigation. The underpass suggests transitions, making it a gateway or gauntlet the player characters must pass through. The sinking house might be a good final encounter (although there could be earlier scenes where the investigators explore the house).

Think about ways a Core Clue might lead from one scene to the next. What might the investigators learn in this scene that propels them to the next? Reread the list of Investigative Abilities for inspiration. Note down at least one clue that leads out from each scene. If a lead-in suggests itself, write that down too.

EYEBALL IN SINK
LEAD-INS:
CORE CLUE: <i>Investigative Procedure - DNA test</i>
LEAD OUTS:

GHOST
LEAD-INS:
CORE CLUE: <i>Reassurance - ghost tells its story</i>
LEAD OUTS:

SPOOKY UNDERPASS
LEAD-INS:
CORE CLUE: <i>Notice</i>
LEAD OUTS: <i>Sinking House</i>

SINKING HOUSE
LEAD-INS:
CORE CLUE: <i>Occult Studies</i>
LEAD OUTS:

The shape of the story begins to suggest itself. The house exists only in the past, or maybe in some pocket dimension of the Outer Dark; it vanished or was demolished decades ago. The underpass is a gateway into the past, leading to the house. The ghost is that of a relative who was caught in the house. (Maybe it could even be the ghost of a player character!)

Sometimes you'll find that a horrific image doesn't fit in this particular scenario. Save it for another game.

Fear Itself

Be judicious — aim for a handful of memorable scares instead of cramming your adventure with every monster you can imagine.

If there isn't a clear route from one horrific set piece to the next, insert investigative scenes in the gap.

MYSTERIOUS DEATH

LEAD-INS: ???

CORE CLUE: Investigative Procedure
- drowned in mud and crushed.
Other clues foreshadow house.

LEAD OUTS: Ghost

GHOST

LEAD-INS: Mysterious Death

CORE CLUE: Reassurance - ghost
tells its story

LEAD OUTS: Local History

LOCAL HISTORY

LEAD-INS: Ghost

CORE CLUE: Streetwise - rumors
about people vanishing

LEAD OUTS: Spooky Underpass

SPOOKY UNDERPASS

LEAD-INS: Local History

CORE CLUE: Notice

LEAD OUTS: Sinking House

SINKING HOUSE

LEAD-INS: Spooky Underpass

CORE CLUE: Occult Studies

LEAD OUTS: Escape

So you now have a rough spine. The investigators find a victim who's died a **mysterious death**. Examining the body turns up clues that foreshadow the sinking house at the end. Because of the characters' interest in the corpse, the **ghost** appears to them — and if they can get the information from the ghost without revealing that it's already dead, they learn that the victim recalls being dragged through a dark tunnel and finding himself in a house, where he drowned in the mud. Further inquiries into **local history** point the investigators to the **spooky underpass** (and maybe hint at the history of the sinking house). They also learn that other people have vanished in similar circumstances.

Traveling through the underpass brings the investigators into the shadowy realm of the Outer Dark, where they enter the **sinking house** and need to find answers before it sinks with them inside.

As a story, this is still quite sketchy, but it's enough to work with. If the choice is between horror and coherence, go for horror.

TRIGGERS

At the start of the scenario comes the **investigative trigger**, the initial tease that grabs the attention of the players. The amount of work that this opening scene has to do varies, depending on the type of game.

- In a one-shot, the trigger needs to grab the players' interest, tell them where their characters are, and set the tone for the whole game. A scenario that starts with a lighthearted bunch of college kids going camping in the woods is going to play out very differently from one that starts with a scene at a funeral.
- In a miniseries, you might have only one big trigger in the first session, and every subsequent session picks up from the cliff-hanger you ended on last week.
- In an ongoing campaign with a "mystery of the week," the trigger has to tantalize jaded players with the promise of an interesting investigation.

Some scenarios have two triggers — they start with an interesting mundane situation that gives the players something to react to and riff on, and then build to an encounter with the supernatural that kicks off the main plot.

In the example scenario we're building, let's continue with the idea of mud and drowning. The initial hook is that the player characters' hometown has been hit by flash flooding. The waters are rising, and everyone has to pitch in to move sandbags and rescue people from submerged buildings. The torrential downpour and rushing waters are great visual hooks, and the widespread nature of the catastrophe means that every player character gets a chance to show off their respective areas of expertise.

Some people got washed away in the flood, through the spooky underpass. The investigators find one of these corpses.

The sinking house is a ghostly echo of a tragedy that happened many years ago, in a similar flood when the town was young.

PERSONALIZED HORROR

A *Fear Itself* scenario should draw the PCs into encounters with personal horror. Scenes should be tailored to the individual characters' Risk Factors, fears, and inner demons.

To give such sequences punch, allow the characters time to establish themselves as having normal lives. Give your stories time to breathe by inserting mundane dramas involving the people who serve as the characters' Sources of Stability. Keep the pressures of ordinary life on the characters as they're drawn into the midnight world of the supernatural. Permit them to further their ordinary goals as well as their quest against the Outer Dark.

Keep the horror hidden in the early stages of the game. A college student tormented by nightmares that she's being abducted by horrible goblin-things at night still has to meet her academic supervisor and get her essay in on time. A college student whose roommate is horribly murdered by goblin-things can probably get a deferral on that project.

Surprise the players by setting scenes of horror in apparently ordinary places, or by switching suddenly from soap opera sequence to gut-munching terror. Swerves can be really effective in jarring the players.

Once you have a few horrific images or ideas for scenes, look for ways to tie them into the fears and Risk Factors

of the player characters. Take the things that disturb you, and link them to the player characters.

For example, it's an obvious choice to make the ghost into a friend or family member of one of the player characters. A more interesting twist might be to make the ghost into an enemy of one of the player characters, someone they've had trouble with in the past. You could even have a subplot where the player character is under suspicion by the local police of having taken advantage of the floods as cover to commit murder.

If another player character has the Risk Factor of Protective (p. 158), you could include the discovery that the sinking house doesn't kill all its victims — many more are entombed in there, preserved in the mud, and the characters need to choose between escaping themselves and trying to rescue the other victims as the house subsides.

CLUES

Possessing even a single point in an Investigative Ability makes a character something of an expert in that field. A character with **Reassurance** isn't just easy to talk to, she's capable of getting almost anyone to open up and trust her. A character with **Computer Science** doesn't just know how to operate a computer, but is familiar with hacking techniques, cryptography, image manipulation, and other esoteric topics. A clue, therefore, is usually non-obvious to a layperson.

Clues fall into four types:

- **Core Clues** point the way to the next scene. Usually a different scene takes place in a different physical location, but that doesn't mean that all Core Clues are just signposts saying "go here." A Core Clue needs to open up a clear avenue of investigation or action — it might be a piece of evidence that undermines a GMC's testimony (so the players need to go back and lean on that GMC with Interpersonal abilities like Intimidation), or an insight into the behavior of a monster ("the creature's only attacking people wearing yellow, so let's buy some yellow T-shirts and be bait").
- **0-point clues** don't point to the next scene, but foreshadow the horror and fill in details about the mystery. Often they're a chance for the player character to get some spotlight time by showing off expert knowledge (and for the GM to show

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off their research). Be generous with 0-point clues — the more information the players have, the better.

- **1 or more-point clues** give a tangible benefit. They might give the characters an edge when confronting the monster, convince a GMC to trust the characters, or speed up the investigation.
- **Inconspicuous clues** are obvious to those with the right ability, and invisible to others. The GM should point out these inconspicuous clues, instead of waiting and hoping that the players ask some unlikely question that might discover them. For example, having the **Streetwise** ability means you've got an insight into the criminal underworld of a city. The GM might say "OK, with your Streetwise, you spot a few guys loitering outside the building. They're all criminal muscle for hire — it looks like this place is guarded."

You can also include Simple Searches, where the clue is obvious, and anyone could find it. You don't need any particular Investigative Ability to find a dropped matchbook that leads you to a sinister dive bar (although **Streetwise** would warn you you'll find trouble there, **Notice** might guess that the matchbook was kicked under the wardrobe during a struggle, and **Investigative Procedure** might lift a fingerprint from it).

There's no need to make your mysteries especially complicated or obscure. The players have to contend with the threat of the unknown and the inherent confusion that comes from being on the other side of the table in a roleplaying game. Even a simple mystery often appears impenetrable when you're in the middle of it. Focus on ways to terrify the players, not puzzle them.

FLOATING CORE CLUES

It is sometimes useful to structure a scenario with one or more free-floating Core Clues. These typically advance the story from one distinct section to another. Where an ordinary Core Clue is linked with a particular scene, a floating clue can be gleaned in any one of several scenes. The GM determines during play which scene gives up the clue.

Floating clues allow you to control the pacing of a scenario. They allow the characters to play out all of the fun or interesting experiences in one section of the scenario before the story takes a dramatic turn. For example, you might want them to separately meet all of the suspects in a murder investigation before they, and the PCs, get locked up for the night in an old, dark house. To achieve this, withhold the Core Clue that moves the PCs to the dark house until after they've met all of the relevant supporting characters. That way, you prevent them from leaping ahead into the narrative without getting all the information they need to fully enjoy what follows.

Likewise, a floating clue allows you to act like a ruthless editor, skipping unnecessary scenes when you need to kick the narrative into a higher gear. Let's say you've chosen five possible scenes in which the PCs might logically get a necessary Core Clue. You figure that this phase of the investigation should take about an hour. If the PCs breeze through the scenes in ten minutes apiece, you can save the Core Clue for the last scene. If they linger, taking twenty minutes per scene, you'll want to make the Core Clue available after the third scene.

Alternate Clues

Once you've got a chain of clues running through the adventure that links all your core scenes, think about other likely courses of action by the player characters, and consider if any of those might be good alternate routes through the mystery (the answer should be "yes," if you can manage it — the more ways to get the investigators into the horror, the better!).

*For example, imagine a Core Clue where the player characters find a corpse on a patch of waste ground, and **History** is the ability that lets the investigators identify the dead woman as a lecturer at the local university. The next scene is one where they ask around at the university history department for clues. However, you anticipate that the players might try to:*

- Use **Cop Talk** to get information out of the police forensics team when they report finding the body. *What can a detailed autopsy reveal about the cause of death? Why do the police stop looking into the case?*
- Use **Streetwise** or **Reassurance** to ask local homeless people if they saw anything. *Were there any witnesses? What clues can be gleaned from them?*

*(Of course, when you actually run the game, you'll find that the players may do something completely unexpected, like hide the corpse, steal her phone, and try **Impersonating** the dead lecturer in the hopes of luring the murderer into the open. Designing a scenario is only half the battle.)*

Player frustration level usually serves as a better trigger for a floating Core Clue than a predetermined time limit. If they're having obvious fun interacting with the vivid supporting characters you've created, you can give them more of what they want by saving the Core Clue for the final scene. On the other hand, if you see they're getting bored and frustrated, you can slip in the floating clue earlier.

TWISTS

It's advisable to include a plot twist of some sort midway through your scenario, to throw the players off balance and heighten the horror. Twists may cast previously collected clues in a new light, revealing that while the players may have all the information, there's another and far more horrific interpretation.

- The ghosts weren't trying to scare us — they were trying to warn us.
- Reading the book has trapped us — now we're in their world.
- I'm the killer — my psychic powers create a murderous tulpa projection, and now my self-loathing is trying to kill me.

A twist might also escalate the scares by escalating the stakes — more monsters show up; an ally betrays the player characters; the investigators discover that the monster is an escaped government experiment, and the sinister black helicopters are on the way.

In the example adventure we're building, the twist can be an escalation of the horror. The waters start rising everywhere, breaking through levees and flood barriers, and trying to drag the investigators away through the spooky underpass.

FINALE

If it's certain that all the player characters will escape, there's no tension and no horror. If it's certain they'll all perish, it's equally dull and inevitable. The finale needs to pose a genuine threat to the characters, but also dangle the possibility that they'll survive — but only if they're both *lucky* with their dice rolls and *clever* in their interpretation of the clues.

The scariest thing you can do with the players is play fair. Include a way to thwart the horror when you're

designing the scenario, and be open to the players finding a creative alternative solution in play (see p. 139) — but don't pull your punches. Roll attack and damage dice in the open. If they missed a key non-core piece of information (either because they chose not to make a particular Investigative spend, or didn't use the right Investigative Ability), don't let it slip.

As GM, you have unlimited power to hinder and help the player characters, but you must be a judgmental god — reward cleverness, but punish failure with equal harshness.

So, we've got a haunted house that's sinking into the mud of hell, and it's abducting people to fill its empty rooms. Maybe the characters discover that there was one survivor of the first floods, and the house won't stop until it drowns that boy who cheated death. Of course, many years have passed and the boy is now an old man — do the players force an innocent man to go unwillingly to his death in order to save the other victims of the house?

Here, you've got three potential challenges for the players to overcome:

1. *They've got to put the clues together to identify the survivor of the first flood.*
2. *They've got to succeed at the tests needed to survive the house's attacks.*
3. *They've got to have the stomach to commit murder.*

OTHER SCENES

Not every scene has to contain a Core Clue pointing to the next scene. You might also have:

- **Alternate Scenes:** Other scenes in which the investigators can get information. These might be alternate ways of getting Core Clues, or give them the chance to eliminate red herrings.
- **Dramatic Scenes:** Scenes where the players get to explore their characters by having them interact with people or circumstances that challenge them or play to their backstories. Provide dramatic foils for your players — if one player character is a delinquent dropout, then have her run into an authority figure, so the player can dramatize her rejection of other people's life script for her, or an estranged parent to heighten the character's isolation and vulnerability.

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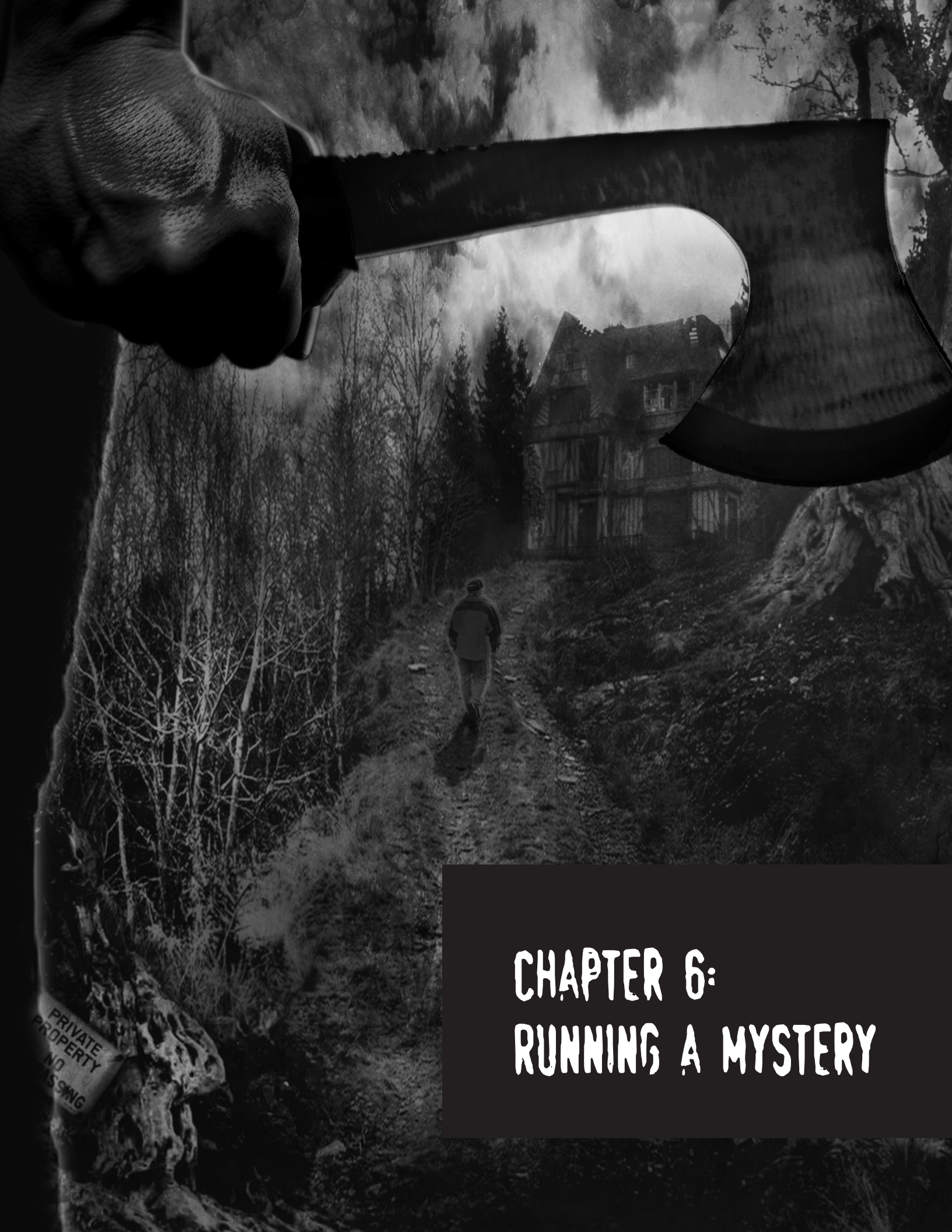
- **Flashbacks:** Similarly, flashbacks can bring the game back to key events in the player characters' lives, showing the moments that brought them to this horrific situation. Flashbacks are a great way to break out of an isolated setting — if all the player characters are trapped in a snowbound hotel with a serial-killing sasquatch trying to get in, then flashbacks let you describe something other than ice and snow and hairy monsters clawing at the walls.
- **Atmospheric Scenes:** Atmospheric scenes don't reveal anything new about the mystery, but raise tension by hinting at the horror. These might also be false scares, where the players think they're about to be endangered, but then find out it's something entirely mundane (*"It's just a stray cat"*).
- **Hazards:** Scenes where the characters have to overcome an obstacle or danger.
- **Antagonist Reactions:** Scenes triggered by the actions of the player characters. These might be counterattacks, threats to the loved ones and Sources of Stability of the player characters, or attempts by the bad guys to cover their tracks.

A HORRIFIC SKELETON

The archetypal horror tale puts elements together in roughly this order:

- **The Trigger:** The investigators are drawn in by an intriguing puzzle or horrifying event.
- **Initial Investigation:** The investigators dig into the clues obtained in the trigger.
- **Foreshadowing (optional):** The initial investigation foreshadows the horror that will eventually be uncovered. This might take the form of physical clues (monster tracks, mutilated corpses), testimonies (confused rumors about a monster, an account of a historical incident), or mundane incidents that echo the same themes (the danger is a disease that changes your personality; foreshadow it with a sickly GMC who keeps sneezing, planting the concept of illness in the players' minds)
- **Evocation of Risk (optional):** The Risk Factors of the characters get triggered, ensuring they continue in the face of the growing horror.
- **Isolation:** The characters become isolated and can rely only on themselves. This may mean they actually go somewhere far from help (*"The clues are all pointing to the island"*), or they discover they're already isolated (*"This island was a great place for a weekend break, but now someone – or something – has stolen our only boat!"*). Alternatively, it can be emotional isolation instead of physical isolation. Maybe no one trusts the characters, or they discover that the supernatural threat subverts people (*"They look human. Anyone could be one of them!"*).
- **Rising Tension:** The characters find themselves in more danger or difficulty – not necessarily supernatural threats, but things are certainly getting worse.
- **First Confrontation:** The supernatural threat attacks or becomes manifest.
- **Escape:** The characters flee to safety.
- **Further Investigation:** The characters learn more about the threat.
- **False Victory (optional):** The further investigation points at a potential way to defeat or escape the threat safely. This hope gets torn away from the players (their solution doesn't work; they're betrayed in the twist; it was a red herring; something happens to wreck their plans).
- **Twist (optional):** The players' assumptions are undercut by a revelation.
- **Final Chase:** The threat appears again and attacks, forcing the characters to flee. The death of some of the player characters is likely.
- **Final Confrontation:** The surviving player characters use what they have learned to defeat or escape the horror.
- **Aftermath:** The survivors return to the normal world, but the horror remains latent and can never be wholly destroyed.

Few horror stories – or horror scenarios – are going to precisely match all these stages. Some stages might be dropped, others combined, or they might happen in a different order, especially in a roleplaying game, where the actions of the players cannot be predicted. Use this skeleton as a guide when plotting your own games. If a scene doesn't map to one of these stages, make sure that it really has a clear purpose in your story.



**CHAPTER 6:
RUNNING A MYSTERY**

PRIVATE
PROPERTY
NO
TRESPASSING

This chapter describes techniques that have proved themselves invaluable when running a horror series based on the personal stories of the characters. When designing scenarios, keep them in mind. Continue to look for new opportunities to use them during play, as your focus on characterization takes the story in unexpected directions.

BE GENEROUS WITH INFORMATION

The more clues and data the players have to work with, the better. Not every clue will be useful, but every clue can add to the atmosphere of oppressive horror. The fact that the carvings in the cave resemble local folktales about a horned man who abducts children (**Humanities**) may not help the players work out what's going on, but it adds to the atmosphere of horror. Fear of the unknown is potent, but it's better to evoke it by hinting at vast and unknowable regions than by revealing nothing. Give the players the impression that they're only scratching the surface, and there is some terrible secret intent behind everything.

Therefore, whenever possible, if a player uses an Investigative Ability, they should get *something*, even if it's not immediately useful. If a player examines a wall with **Notice**, and you don't have a Notice clue to hand, try to improvise something foreboding.

- *"Examining the wall, you find that it's covered in a thin smear of ash, like something was burned in this room on an open fire. Something greasy."*
- *"The wall's at a weird angle to the rest of the room. Either the house has shifted over the years, or the architect had some strange ideas about geometry."*
- *"You find some little scratches on the wall, an evenly spaced row of scratches. Like someone was using them to count days, maybe. There are lots of them."*
- *"While examining the wall, you happen to glance out the window, and you could have sworn you saw something moving out there."*

Be flexible with prepared clues. If you were planning on giving out a clue with, say, **Research**, and a player uses a related ability like **History**, give out the Research clue anyway.

GM Toolkit

When running a game, have the following items at hand:

- Dice, pens, pencils, scratch paper
- A clock or watch for timekeeping
- A list of names that can be used as needed for GM characters on the fly
- A list of interesting or atmospheric locations in the vicinity of the game setting, to use as backdrops in unplanned scenes
- A list of scenes to be dropped in as needed; potential directed scenes or flashbacks for each player character; a few weird or horrific images and spooky encounters
- A suitably scary soundtrack. Avoid well-known movie soundtracks (unless you're deliberately trying to draw out associations in the players' minds) and go for atmospheric, quietly disturbing pieces.

Fear Itself

Fear Itself

If you give no information, either tell the players what they might need to do to find out more, or else say there's nothing to be learned here with that ability.

For example:

Player: I'll examine the corpse with Investigative Procedure.

GM: There aren't any surface marks suggesting cause of death. You'll need to bring it back to the morgue and have the lab do a full autopsy. (Telling the player that there's more to be found, but not immediately.)

Or:

Player: I'll examine the corpse with Investigative Procedure.

GM: There aren't any surface marks suggesting cause of death, and you've got a gut feeling that even a full autopsy won't tell you anything useful about what killed this guy. (Telling the player outright that there's nothing useful here to be learned with that ability.)

Remind players of the clues they've found and the leads they haven't investigated. Help them manage what they've discovered.

WATCH THE CLOCK, WATCH THE PLAYERS

One of the GM's most important responsibilities is to control the pace of the game, like the conductor of an orchestra. Back off and give the players time to discuss what they've learned and to explore their characters, then step back in and stir things up by asking them what they're going to do next, or by introducing a GM character or external event that they've got to react to. Consider your cast of GMCs as dramatic foils for the players, and use them to needle the player characters in their weak spots.

Keep one eye on the clock. Know where you are in the game session, so you can build to a suitable ending or mid-story cliff-hanger. The average game session lasts 3-4 hours, although a portion of that time inevitably goes to extraneous activities like ordering pizza, recommendations on what to binge-watch

next on streaming media, complaining about work/politics/the cruel dominance of the alien overlords who recently invaded Earth, or searching for dice that rolled under the table. Of actual play time, dedicate the first half or two-thirds to investigation and foreshadowing, then split the remaining time between building to the final confrontation and the final battle itself.

Watch the players to see how engaged and interested they are. If one player dominates the conversation, then run a directed scene or flashback focusing on one of the other characters. If a player seems withdrawn, offer a clue or a call to action ("You get a phone call..."), but bear in mind that some players are happy to avoid the spotlight.

CLOSE OFF RED HERRINGS

Red herrings (false leads) come up in detective fiction because the author is trying to mislead the readers and maintain the mystery. They're less important in a roleplaying game, since the players inevitably come up with their own misinterpretations of the evidence and generate wild theories about what's really going on.

When the players investigate a false lead, give them opportunities to use their Investigative Abilities to disprove their erroneous theories, closing off the red herring without making the players feel like they've made a mistake in following the lead.

The players suspect that local mechanic Bill Herring was out on the Lenley farm on the night of a murder. You could just shut down this line of questioning entirely when they interrogate Bill.

*"Bill insists he wasn't there, and thanks to **Bullshit Detector**, you're sure he's telling the truth. He wasn't there."*

However, it's more rewarding to give the players extra information, even if it's not directly relevant to the main investigation.

GM: Bill twists awkwardly in his seat. "I was at home that night. Alone."

Player: Do I even need Bullshit Detector to tell he's lying?



GM: You can tell he's lying, all right, but he seems more nervous than anything else. How do you want to push him? **Intimidation?** **Reassurance?**¹

Player: Um, can I spend a point of Bullshit Detector? I look quizzically at him and just let his denial hang there in the air, so he feels like he has to fill the silence.

GM: Sure. (As Bill) "All right! All right! I was over near the Lenley place. I was, ah, visiting Stacy Conrad. Just don't tell my wife, all right?"

The players can now eliminate Bill as a suspect, but it feels like an accomplishment, not a setback.

Alternatively, you may be able to turn a red herring into an alternate Core Clue with a moment's thought — when the players head off to interview the wrong suspect,

check your list of prepared clues for any information you can introduce into this unplanned scene.

In a miniseries or campaign, red herrings often turn out to be foreshadowing for future plot developments (maybe both Bill and Stacy are part of the cult that's behind all the weird horror in town). They can also be used to temper players who are too eager to jump to conclusions and make accusations, by showing them the benefits of digging a little deeper.

PLAY TO THE MEDIUM'S STRENGTHS

A tabletop roleplaying game is a conversation that flails around, trying to come to a consensus on a narrative. A game is full of false starts, tangents, and miscommunications. Descriptions are usually improvised off-the-cuff, and depictions of character and dialogue can be stilted. Even if you're playing with a troupe of professional horror writers and actors, the game is still an unpredictable, unscripted dialogue between players and GM. Of course it's not going to be as polished as a Hollywood movie or a horror novel! We play roleplaying games because they're full of unexpected twists, because we get to be the ones making decisions, and because we get to hang out with friends and tell a story together.

Some classic horror elements are hard to execute effectively in a roleplaying game. Jump scares, for example, rely on slowly building tension, and then shocking the audience with a sudden BOO! when something jumps out at the camera. Building tension through description is tough enough, but having a sudden attack be *scary* (as opposed to exciting) is exceedingly hard to achieve in a roleplaying game. Fears of isolation are hard to pull off when you've got four or five player characters in a scene. Detailed mysteries that hinge on one tiny, obscure detail fall flat because it's easy to miss that one tiny detail in the midst of a lengthy conversation.

Other horror tropes can leverage the nature of roleplaying games.

– Insert horror into the gap between player and character. You can tell the player that there's

¹ Experienced GUMSHOE GMs can, indeed, vocalize the bold-text convention for denoting Investigative Abilities.

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something *wrong* about a seemingly mundane object or individual in the scene, some indefinable sense of dread or malice, without having to actually determine why the object is so creepy. You can draw the player's attention to that one weird detail. You can add a sense of the numinous, of invisible powers and threats lurking behind reality, by playing with the gap between what the player knows and the character perceives.

- Instead of giving lengthy descriptions of a horrific sight, make the players complicit in the horror by having them ask questions and take action to learn more. Instead of saying "You find the corpse of your cousin Kevin — and he's been disemboweled!", start off by telling the players they've found a face-down body, and wait for one of them to say "OK, I'll look at the face," before revealing that Kevin's dead. Divulge information bit by bit in response to the players' actions — don't have Kevin's intestines fall out until a player declares she's turning the body over. Give horrific responses to questions about the scene.
- Bring in other players by getting them to play supporting cast members — or even shapeshifting monsters. The default assumption is that all players are treated equally by the GM, so undercutting that can be fruitful. (For example, in a one-shot game, secretly give all but one of the players a note saying "Your character isn't going to survive this adventure," and see how the group dynamic changes when most of the players are looking for an entertaining and dramatic death scene.)
- In a detective novel, the lone hero has his own particular set of skills, and relies on a supporting cast of experts and informants to provide plot exposition or leads in other fields. In a roleplaying game, you've got multiple protagonists. Take advantage of this to explore different perspectives on a mystery. For example, if one player is playing the gruff detective investigating a murder, another player character might be the cousin of the victim. The detective's interactions with the family of the deceased will be very different to those of the cousin. Roleplaying games can support complex, multi-threaded mysteries, where the players approach the terrible truth from different avenues of investigation.

DIRECTED SCENES

When following the characters in personal moments, use **directed scenes** to compress time and share your dramatic intent with the players.

In a directed scene, you place one or more PCs in a scene just as it's getting interesting, avoiding the preliminaries and pedestrian connective detail a talented writer or editor always cuts out of a story.

You stage a directed scene for Ralf's character, Michel.

"You're in Thelma's hotel room, the slime from the green blurry things still marring your sport coat. She's throwing bottles at her locked bathroom door. Judging from the terrified, whiskey-rotted voice on the other side, she's got a man in there."

If the player appears puzzled, you may choose to give an assignment of sorts, explaining what the scene is meant to establish:

"Here you're to dramatize Michel's relationship with Thelma."

Directed scenes may establish Sources of Stability, Risk Factors, or personal goals, moving them from the static potential of entries on the character sheet to dramatic enactment in actual events unfolding before the entire group.

Juice them up by enlisting the other players to take on supporting roles during these scenes. Give them a brief description of the supporting character, and tell the chosen player what that character wants to accomplish.

Lynne seems a little bored by the proceedings, so you assign her the role of Thelma.

"You love Michel like the son you never had, but he's always trying to get between you and your pleasures. Your intention is to get rid of him as quickly as possible, with a minimum of fuss and hurt feelings."

Once a directed scene has dramatized the character aspect you want to establish, and seems to be running out of steam or headed off on a tangent, end it by cutting to a new scene. To maintain forward momentum and avoid confusion, it's best to make the next scene a standard one involving all of the group and concerning the main action, rather than another directed scene.

FLASHBACKS

A special sort of directed scene is the **flashback**, in which characters enact scenes from their character's pasts. Your goal as GM is to surprise not only the other players, but the spotlight player as well, by throwing new light on their backstory. Again, the point is to take a part of the character's background that usually stays in the player's head and in a description only the GM reads, and bring it alive for everyone. It goes without saying that the player's choices are somewhat constrained during a flashback sequence; you must contrive to prevent them from doing anything that changes what has been conclusively established about their character in the present-day, main action. However, where a flashback seems to contradict a character's description of his own past, you can certainly treat what happens in the memory sequence as truth, and the description as a self-serving account or false memory.

Use rules only sparingly during flashback sequences. They're necessary only when the outcome of a past action cannot be deduced from what's already been established in the series. Step in when necessary to guide events so that they don't contradict the present timeline. This may be especially important when you've directed other players to take on supporting roles.

You're running a flashback scene in which Shakira remembers a frightening run-in with her abusive father when she was a child. You've assigned Erik the role of her father, and he's playing it to the hilt, by describing the character going after Shakira's mother with a kitchen knife. You can't run it as a typical Scuffling contest between father and mother, because Shakira's mom is one of her Sources of Stability, and thus alive and kicking in the series' current timeline. Instead you step in, guiding Erik's actions by saying, "Of course, Bruno didn't kill Rosirene that day, but..." Then you allow the scene to continue to another satisfying conclusion that maintains your campaign's established continuity.

The TV show *Lost*, which has horror elements even if it isn't primarily a scary show, makes absolutely brilliant use of the flashback device. It allows each character to be introduced twice — once as who they seem to be to

Flashbacks and Campaign Style

The usefulness of flashbacks depends on the mode of horror you hope to evoke. They suit a literary-style campaign with a heavy emphasis on characterization. If you're playing a cinematic horror game with a high body count and gleeful reliance on teen-flick clichés, you'll want to skip them altogether. In such a game, characterization that goes beyond the stereotypical is out of genre.

the other castaways, and again as they really were in their life before coming to the island. Watch, learn, and steal.

For example, you might want to include a series of linked flashbacks in a single episode. As in the main timeline, each flashback sequence ends with an unresolved question. Thus you have two lines of suspense running concurrently. One asks what will happen next in the present, the other what still stands to be revealed in the flashbacks.

Flashbacks concerning your character are as much for the benefit of your fellow players as for you. You may have everything interesting about

your own character in your head, but can convey only a fraction of this in a quick verbal description to the other players. *Showing* your character doing something makes a much more vivid impression than simply *telling* the GM and other players about some personality quirk. If you occasionally finish a flashback feeling that it hasn't added much, remember to consider how it sharpens your character portrayal for other participants.

DIRECTING SCENES

The following GM hints apply equally to flashbacks and directed scenes.

- Never forget who your focus character is, and what the scene is meant to accomplish. Some players may try to take over a scene when given a supporting character to play. If they dominate, signal them to dial it back, perhaps reminding them of the scene's dramatic purpose. The scene is always about a player character.
- Strong scenes are about conflict. If the PC or a supporting player seems to be defusing the tension, throw an element into the scene to kick it back into high gear.
- Take notes. Vivid supporting characters may suddenly come to the fore in mid-scene. If so, you'll want to bring them back later, either in the back- or main story. It's embarrassing if you've forgotten crucial information when the time comes to reuse them.

CUTAWAYS

One of the huge mistakes characters make in horror movies is to split up in the face of danger. As GM, you should always be encouraging players to do that.

You'll also want to run solo scenes or have just a few cast members present during mundane sequences that develop character and further the PCs' personal goals.

To do this, you'll need to rely on the cutaway technique. Here you spotlight the actions of a few players while the others look on. In some genres, gamers can get restless while offstage. In a properly bloodcurdling horror game, they'll likely be glad for a few moments of respite when it's somebody else's *cojones* laid out on the sizzling griddle.

The secrets to successful cutaways are:

- Allow all players to observe cutaway scenes they're not involved in as spectators. Require them to separate their own knowledge from character knowledge. Properly managed, it's always more ominous to know what horrible events might be in the offing than to be surprised. (This mode of suspense is what makes Alfred Hitchcock's movies so inexorably compelling, years after they were made. Which is not to say that there's anything wrong with the occasional out-of-nowhere jolt.) The exception to this is when you're trying to sow paranoia among the players.
- Keep scenes short and snappy. Think about how quickly ensemble TV shows pop from one story thread to the next. Cut on cliff-hanger moments, or when the spotlight player(s) need time to think of what to do next.
- See that something interesting is happening to everyone at the same time. This may be challenging, as it is often the wary player's goal to make sure that nothing interesting ever happens to his character.

MAINTAINING MENACE

More so than in more adventure-oriented roleplaying games, your primary duty as GM is to sustain a mood of unease. Occasional moments of comic relief and relaxation can work in your favor, softening

up the players for the tension to come. However, if your players are more bored or complacent than scared, take whatever immediate action you can to ramp up the creep factor. Whether you throw in an omen of doom, a disturbing visual image, or a flat-out assault by enemy forces, remember that subtlety only goes so far in horror. Don't be afraid to grab the players by the metaphorical lapels. Horror is not meant to be fair. It's best if you don't have to abandon your storyline's internal logic to toss in a scare, but that's a secondary consideration to keeping the fright going. Emulate the shamelessness of horror movie directors. Throw in unrelated dangers to make the players jump. Use dream sequences and hallucinations if need be. A sustained mood comes before everything else.

THE SKEPTICAL AUTHORITIES AND OTHER LIMITATIONS

It is a standard trope of horror that the traditional guardians of order and normality, such as the police, parents, teachers, and news agencies, are resolutely blind to what the protagonists are going through. The usual scenario involves young protagonists, who know the dreadful truth, struggling against the obstinacy of the older generation.

There is a sound dramatic reason for this. Successful horror depends upon a sense of isolation, whether this is geographical (the lonely cabin in the woods) or social (nobody in town believes you!). The reassurance of a support network is poison to the sense of creeping unease that horror seeks to cultivate. Eventually, once the protagonists have already been through hell, society may come to their aid and recognize that they were right all along, but this only happens at the end of the investigation, if at all.

The GM should enforce this convention stringently, cutting off player access to outside support. Cellphones fail to work. Phone lines are cut. Cars break down and bridges collapse. Police are politely skeptical or threaten to run you in for wasting their time, depending on how you approach them.

All of these limitations then act as motivators for the players to press ahead with the investigation. Unless they can *prove* that sinister events are afoot in their quiet country town, the police will be worse than useless. Unless they can find out for certain exactly what web of

occult association links the murder victims, they are liable to join them. If they don't uncover what happened to Charlie, nobody will. There isn't a police station around for miles, the phones aren't working, and he could already be dead...

The GM may find it hard to give the players the impression that running to the authorities would be a bad idea. Risk Factors and character backgrounds help with this, as some characters will naturally recoil from police involvement, but in case these are not enough for the story, the following three classic demotivators may help:

- *The police would never believe us.* Who in their right mind would go running down to the police station babbling about skinless walking corpses?
- *The police would assume we were responsible.* Have the players had to kill anyone? Have they been put into a position where it looks like they've killed someone?
- *The police are in on it.* Worst of all is the possibility that the authorities themselves are somehow complicit in the horror. Can you really trust them to watch over you?

Similarly, weigh down other authority figures and family members with their own concerns — young children, demanding jobs, chronic illnesses, and the like. Give people reasons to dismiss the player characters' fears early in the adventure.

Fear Itself

ESCAPE POOLS

Players may decide to prioritize self-preservation over their Risk Factors, despite the GM's invocation of Hard Risk Factors and their characters' instincts ("I don't care if my best friend is in there – it's too dangerous! Let's get out of here!"). In such cases, offer players the chance to escape their predicament using an Escape Pool.

In horror movies, when the protagonists try to run away from the plot, their flight is thwarted by mischance or by enemy action. The car doesn't start; there's a fierce blizzard; the exit from the mine has caved in; the monster in the lake eats the boat; the escape capsule won't launch until someone flips the safeties on the main reactor. To have any chance of escape, the protagonists have to work at finding a way out.

The Escape Pool is a pool of points that works like a General Ability pool. The pool starts out empty, but points can be added by:

- Discovering clues that point to a way out (+1 to +3 Escape per clue)
- Spending suitable Investigative Ability points (**Outdoor Survival** to navigate in the wilderness, **Trivia** to find that old bricked-up tunnel) (+1 Escape per clue)
- Making General Ability tests (**Fleeing**, **Mechanic**, and **Drive** especially) (+1 Escape per clue)

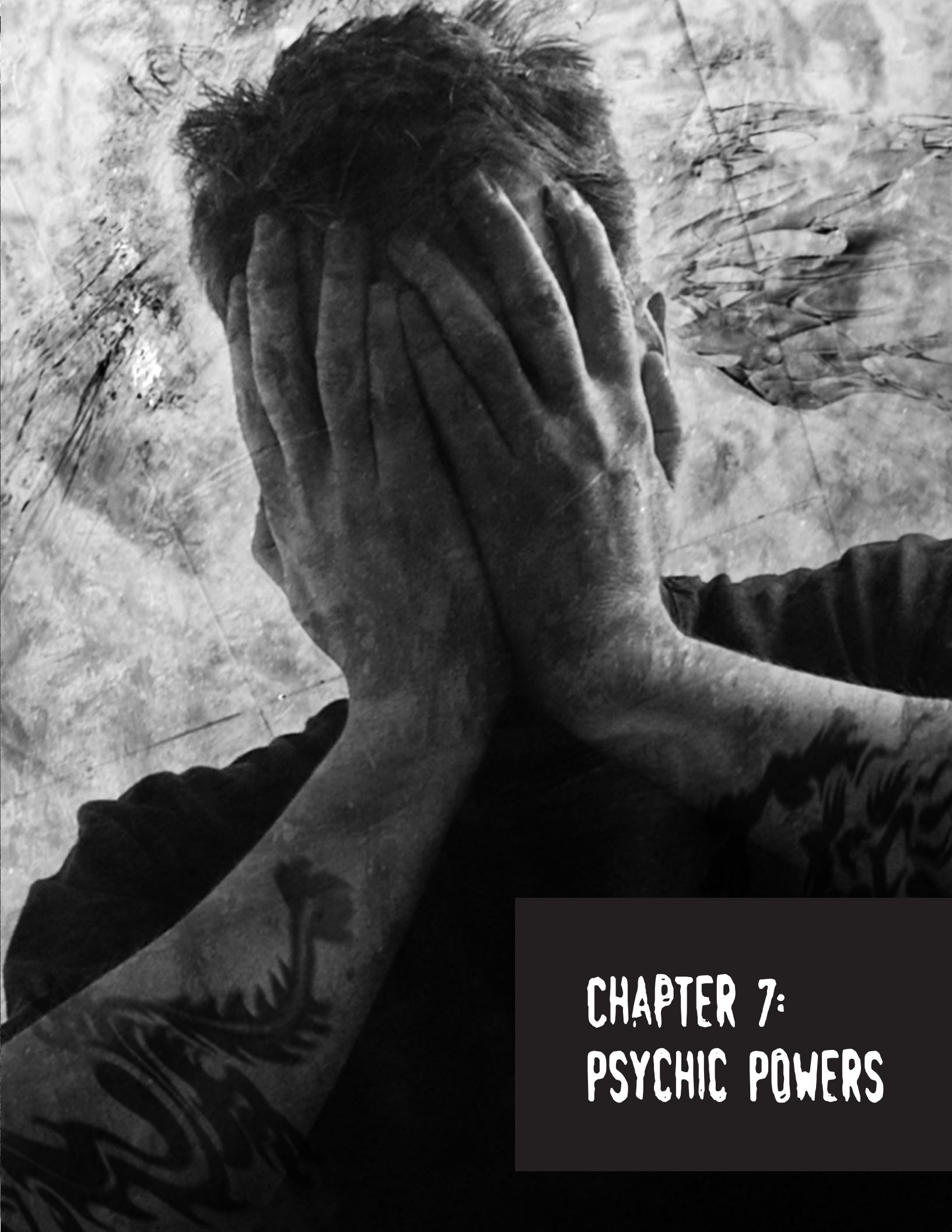
The Difficulty for the Escape test is usually 6, +2 per player character attempting to flee. So, if two characters are trying to flee, then the roll plus the number of points spent from the pool needs to equal or exceed 10. The Escape Pool is shared among all the player characters, and the players only make one roll per escape attempt.

Here's the thing – any player may spend points from the Escape Pool to make an escape when it's appropriate, and that player doesn't have to take anyone else along if they don't want to. So, if there are three players, then the Difficulty for all three to escape is 12 ($6 + 2 \times 3$). If only one player tries to escape, then the Difficulty for that attempt is only 8 ($6 + 2 \times 1$). In other words, it's easier to escape if you're on your own.

If the escape attempt fails, not only do the players lose any points spent from the Escape Pool, but the GM also gets to hit them with a nasty hazard.

If the escape attempt succeeds, then the escaping characters are out of the game. They'll never know what was really going on, and the horror continues to menace the world, but they're alive for the moment.

Don't use Escape Pools if the player characters can just walk away from the mystery – use them when the characters are physically isolated, and getting out is a big, all-or-nothing moment in the story.



**CHAPTER 7:
PSYCHIC POWERS**

Fear Itself

From the beginning of time, certain individuals have been sensitive to otherworldly vibrations. The origin of psychic powers remains obscure. In most cases, they seem to be conferred at birth, passing down through generations as an inherited trait. It is not uncommon for powers to remain latent until puberty.

For every true psychic, there are hundreds of charlatans, some of them self-deluded. Combining sleight of hand with simple observation, some of it covert, they're able to elicit enough information from their clients to sound prophetic. Occult circles are rife with phony psychics, so you'll probably run into some of them during play. A fake medium might make an interesting choice for a player character.

When creating a psychic character, determine his attitude toward his abilities. The character may show off or exploit them for material gain. He may adopt a strict code of ethics, allowing himself to use them only in an altruistic fashion.

It is just as likely that he fears them and uses them as little as possible. Though many psychics think of themselves as spiritual healers peering into a world of positive light, all render themselves additionally susceptible to the energies of the Outer Dark each time they draw on their abilities. If the character has so much as brushed against the machinations of Unremitting Horror, his psychic powers have, depending on the nature of his so-called gift, served as a conduit for unbearably nightmarish feelings, sendings, or visions.

Mechanically, Psychic Powers are treated as Investigative Abilities. You can pick up some 0-point clues for free, or spend points for more information. You may be able to use psychic powers to get clues that are also available via a standard Investigative Ability, or that are the equivalent of extra information available from Investigative spends.

When it's dramatically appropriate, a spend from one psychic power might allow a player character to temporarily use another one. A Messenger might be able to tune into a particular ghost and act as a Medium; Aura Reading on a personal item might work like a Sensitive's ability.

In a standard *Fear Itself* series, we strongly recommend that any psychic character be able to take only one psychic ability.

Remember, GMs retain the right to disallow psychic powers if they don't fit the tone of their planned series.

AURA READING

To those with the sight to see, every living organism is surrounded by a nimbus of energy. By studying the color and movement of this energy, you gain insight into people and animals.

When you read a person's aura, you can learn any one of the following facts (the GM may allow you to choose, tell you what you discover, or tell you how many points you need to spend to learn a particular fact):

- the subject's general emotional state, including which of the following adjectives best fits his current condition: joyful, depressed, angry, amused, confused, frightened, or relaxed
- whether the subject is healthy or unhealthy
- if the subject is under the influence of a spirit or other supernatural being

The aura projected by creatures of the Outer Dark is so intrinsically wrong that those unlucky enough to perceive it suffer a traumatic emotional jolt. Whenever you see such an aura, you must make a 5-point Stability test.

Some beings of Unremitting Horror can suppress this aura at will, replacing it with an ordinary human aura reflecting whatever emotion or condition they desire. They employ this ability when disguising themselves as people.

MEDIUM

You can speak to the spirits of the dead.

(Or rather, you speak to discarnate entities, most of whom identify themselves as such. A typical Medium believes that they're ghosts, communicating from the afterlife, but maybe you've begun to suspect that a more sinister explanation is at play.)

Sometimes you hear these entities speaking to you unbidden, especially

Psychic Powers and Madness

Psychic powers leave your mind open to the malign probings of the Outer Dark. Each time you use a psychic power (even for a 0-point clue), it costs you 1 Stability point.

Your extrasensory awareness may force you to make additional Stability rolls to which your duller colleagues are immune. A continuous state of heightened sensitivity can be tough to bear in the aftermath of a fight, or even as you pass a roadside accident.

when you enter areas of particular emotional import to a troubled spirit. To contact a specific entity, you must typically organize a séance, a ritual in which a small group of sympathetic observers participates. The presence of skeptics may disrupt the proceedings, preventing contact with the world beyond.

Typically you work through a spirit guide, a personal guardian spirit who acts as a sort of otherworldly switchboard operator to the great beyond. Be sure to describe your spirit guide, or what you know of it, during your first in-game séance. Your spirit guide remains constant throughout your career. It may be the ghost of a departed loved one or acquaintance, a historical figure, or an iconic figure of uncertain derivation. Examples of the latter category often bear exotic names: they might be of Persian, Indian, or Native American extraction.

During a séance, you hear all of the communicating spirits in your head. You may remain in control of your body throughout, repeating what you hear to the other participants. Alternatively, you can open your body to spirit possession. In this instance, both the spirit guide and any contacted spirits take control of your physical form, speaking directly to participants in a distorted version of your voice. As in a dream, you retain little or no recollection of what possessing entities do or say while you're under their volition. This method is more impressive to paying clients and may allow for clearer communication with outside questioners. Your spirit guide is supposed to protect you from malign spirits or overactive ghosts while you're in this state, returning control of your body to you if matters get out of hand. However, it may be helpless to intervene if a powerful Outer Dark entity chooses to toy with you. For all you know, your guide might be a malign presence of the Outer Dark. Possession is riskier than simply listening to voices in your head.

At any rate, your spirit guide attempts to contact the desired individual, who then manifests to reply to questions. Vague answers are a sign that an imposter — at best a lonely spirit unrelated to the subject — has substituted itself for the genuine article. Alternatively, they may indicate inquiries beyond the genuine spirit's comprehension, such as the specific nature of the afterlife.

Spirits may be able to achieve spontaneous, unwanted connections to you. Only rarely will these be full-blown possessions. More likely, you merely hear the

whispering of eerie voices deep inside your mind. You can attempt to fend off an unwanted contact attempt by rolling your Stability against a Difficulty Number determined by the GM. If your result exactly equals the Difficulty Number, the subject spirit possesses you, whether you like it or not. Difficulty Numbers increase during situations, such as séances, where you've opened yourself up to the spirit world. They decrease when you're going about your daily business in completely mundane surroundings. A malign entity finds it much harder to possess you when you're shopping in a well-lit, crowded supermarket than when you're alone at night in a creepy old house.

When you're seeking communication with the spirit world, entities anxious to communicate with the living world are easier to reach than reluctant communicants. The ghosts of both the long and recently dead are hard to contact. The former have reincarnated, merged with the cosmic ether, or are safely enmeshed in heaven's bliss, whereas the latter are still confused and on the road to their mysterious final destinations.

Once in touch with a spirit, you (or another séance participant) use an Interpersonal ability to get useful information out of the conversation, as you would with an ordinary living subject. During a possession-style communication, the Medium is for all intents and purposes absent and may not ask questions.

If you are possessed and wish to break contact against the spirit's will, it's a Medium spend. Really powerful spirits may require a Stability contest in addition to a spend.

MESSENGER

You receive messages from unknown discarnate entities. Unlike a Medium, you can't dial up a specific ghost to talk to, nor can you specify particular questions your entities will answer. Instead, their communications indicate a mood. Which mood they suggest seems to depend on events in which you are involved, or have the capacity to influence. When you or your colleagues and loved ones are relatively safe, the communications are lulling and calm. When imminent danger threatens, they become erratic, energetic, and ominous. On other occasions, the communications from beyond seem to portend large-scale threats to persons beyond your immediate circle. They might reach an apex of anxiety before a destructive storm, terrible accident,

or terrorist attack. When the source of their concern is not immediately apparent, you may be able to use Investigative Abilities to decode the content of their communications.

You receive the messages in one of the following ways. Specify your choice before play begins.

- **Raudive Voices:** Also known as Electronic Voice Phenomenon. Leave a tape recorder or other audio device running and unattended in an apparently sound-free environment, preferably in the middle of the night. When you listen intently to the recording, faintly whispering voices can be dimly heard.
- **Automatic Writing:** Enter a trance state at a desk with writing implement at the ready and plenty of paper on hand. Unseen hands seize yours, rapidly scrawling out a stream of words of obscure mystical meaning. Much of what you write borders on gibberish, but useful advice may be hidden within. Sometimes it's in code; on other occasions, you receive material written in a language you can neither read nor write.
- **Automatic Art:** As above, but you use art supplies and receive images instead of words.
- **Music From the Grave:** Again you enter a trance state, in this case while seated at a piano or holding a violin. (Discarnate beings appear to favor these two instruments. Your GM may approve other suitably atmospheric choices.) You are unconscious of your playing and do not recall it when you hear it on playback. Alternatively, you may scribble down compositions, which must then be played by a trained musician.

At times you'll feel an irresistible impulse to use this power immediately. This most often happens when the spirit world is in turmoil, anticipating some dreadful event. If you fail to heed the call, you are treated as if you've resisted your Risk Factor—see p. 50.

PREMONITIONS

Ordinary investigations reconstruct events from the past. By using your psychic gift, you can receive visions of the future. These appear to you in the form of vivid waking dreams, with visual and auditory components.

In some instances you may even detect smells or respond to climatic conditions like cold

or humidity. You feel as if you are witnessing these future events. Depending on what you're attempting to investigate, you envision yourself in the middle of things, perhaps even as a victim of whatever catastrophe you're envisioning.

As far as you can tell, the future is not irrevocably predetermined. When you focus on events over which you have no control (including control by indirect influence), they tend to happen as you imagine. But when you experience a grim vision and can do something to stop it from coming true, you can avert the future you predicted.

To use this ability, pose a question about the future and make a spend. You must specify or imply a particular time frame. For example:

- What will happen tonight at the party?
- What will happen if I open this door?
- What will the killer do this evening?

Sometimes the GM may declare that you have a spontaneous premonition of a future event; often this will be in the form of an investigative trigger for a mystery.

Requests for information not specifically about future events go unanswered. Also unanswered are questions with an indefinite time frame. Examples of inapplicable questions:

- Who is the killer?
- What will I die of?
- Is that all there is?

Perhaps mercifully, your visions are generally blurred, so that you can't always tell exactly who or what is eviscerating your uncle with a circular saw. In other words, the visions don't provide Core Clues, or significant detailed information you don't already have. Instead they tell you what the stakes are if you fail to act. If you've learned already by other means that the circular saw killer is Leon, the high school janitor, you probably do see him in the vision. If not, you know that something terrible is going to happen, but you still don't have the killer's identity. (Otherwise your game will face the same structural flaw of most TV shows centering on psychic detectives, which is that the protagonists need only wait until the seer gets a clear enough vision to solve the mystery.)

REMOTE VIEWING

Also known as clairvoyance, this gift allows you to see distant events. You must focus on a particular location, either one you've been to before, or one you can pinpoint on a map. Photographs can also be used to hone in on particular locations, but you have to be sure where they were taken. Having a talisman or token connected to your target helps immensely; if you want to spy on an abandoned military bunker, then holding a bullet or tasting engine oil from that base might reduce the cost of the ability.

While using the ability, you go into a trance and close your eyes. You then envision the chosen location, perceiving it in a blurry monochrome, as if through a very old and unclear security camera monitor. Most remote viewers experience their visions in gradations of green or blue. You receive only visual information. This ability does not allow you to look into the past or future. You see what's happening at the location right this minute.

If other realities exist, it is not possible to see into them with Remote Viewing. Should anyone offer to show you how to see into the Outer Dark, turn them down. Instant and incurable madness would surely result from the most fleeting visual contact with it.

Anything awful you see while Remote Viewing can trigger a Stability roll, just as if you were present.

Intelligent and powerful supernatural beings can tell that you're watching them, and view *you* remotely in return. They can detect your location, memorize your appearance, and possibly even read your mind.

Outer Dark entities and their human minions can shield places from your prying, forcing you to spend more Remote Viewing points or Stability to overcome their protections.

SENSITIVE

Whenever people experience powerful emotions, they leave behind a faint psychic residue that Sensitives such as yourself can detect, even years after the fact. The emotional fallout from especially traumatic events may impose itself on you automatically. Usually, though, you spend a few minutes concentrating, and are then able to read the most powerful feelings associated with a given location. You fix on the single most resonant feeling the place gives off.

The GM determines what this is, according to the following general guidelines.

- Human emotions are stronger than those of animals.
- Recent events are more potent than older ones.
- Negative experiences, especially of violence, linger more tenaciously than happy ones.
- The presence of Outer Dark entities overwhelms mere human feelings.

Fear Itself

Fear Itself

Above all, dramatic necessity rules, so that you're more likely to pick up on psychic vibrations relevant to your situation in the current storyline than useless red herrings.

If Outer Dark creatures are present when you use the power, you gain a disturbing glimpse into their warped and sadistic psyches, triggering a Stability roll with a Difficulty ranging from 5 to 8.

SYNCHRONICITY

Meaningful coincidences happen to and around you. Often these provide new insight, serving as personal omens giving you direction in life when you can't figure out what to do next. These events are never overtly supernatural, inexplicable, or particularly improbable. If you dream about a kingfisher, and then find a dead one in your garden, nothing eerie has happened. It's just a coincidence—but by assigning meaning to it, you may find a way out of your current dilemma, whatever that may be.

To draw on your powers, you must situate yourself in a place where random events are likely to occur. If you're sitting in a locked, empty room with no phone, there's not much that can happen to you. However, if you go and sit in a crowded park, the range of possible coincidental events increases immeasurably.

Synchronicity doesn't provide Core Clues. Instead, it gives you guidance on what to do next when you're stumped. Often the coincidences will redirect you to facts you already have on hand but have neglected or improperly interpreted.

Although synchronicity is the safest of the psychic powers, entities of the Outer Dark can still use it against you. You may be confronted with sanity-challenging manifestations. For example, a person planning suicide might unknowingly hesitate until the exact moment when you're passing below to leap from a high window, then land on the sidewalk right in front of you. Users of this gift are at high risk of freak accidents.

HIGH-POWERED PSYCHICS

In a game revolving around psychic abilities, the GM may wish to allow more blatant, high-action powers. These unsubtle powers are treated as General Abilities, not Investigative ones. Allowing these powers into a game moves it away from pure horror (it's scary to

know something horrible is going to happen, but have no obvious way to stop it; it's less scary when you've got the supernatural equivalent of a handgun in your skull).

Activating one of these powers costs 1 Stability.

TELEKINESIS

You can move objects with the power of your mind. If you use this power consciously, then it's hard to exert any major force. You can shove small objects around, make things rattle, lift things without touching them, or cause objects to heat up spontaneously. You can only affect one object at a time, and the objects must be nearby.

OBJECT SIZE	DIFFICULTY
Coin, key, pencil, door handle, small knife	3
Door, bag, large book, big knife	4
Person, trashcan, shotgun	5

Treat multiple objects of the same type as a single larger object. So a whole rack of small knives is Difficulty 4.

MOTION	DIFFICULTY MODIFIER
Rattling	+0
Moving	+1
Heating	+1
Levitating	+2
Fast movement/ heating	additional +1

So, making a pencil rattle mysteriously is Difficulty 3 (base 3 for a pencil, +0 for rattling). Making a pencil fly at speed across the room is Difficulty 6 (base 3, +2 for levitating, +1 for fast movement).

Once you've grabbed something with Telekinesis, you need to spend 1 Telekinesis point per round to maintain your hold on it.

The All-Psychic Series

Although GMs are generally advised to allow only one psychic per group, an interesting variation to the typical horror campaign is one in which all of the characters are gifted with extrasensory powers. In this case, they either know each other at the start of play, through spiritualist or New Age circles, or quickly become bound to one another through a series of linked and ominous visions. *Glass Beach Summer* (p. 141) is a miniseries that plays with this concept.

Such a group, with its extra opportunities to make Stability rolls, is more fragile than most. In our opinion, that would be part of the grim fun of such a series. However, GMs hoping for more of a supernatural heroes vs. monsters feel may wish to dole out generous quantities of free Stability points, or reduce the standard difficulties of Stability rolls.

Needless to say, in an all-psychic series, no caps apply to psychic characters. Depending on group size, you may wish to allow characters to take up to two psychic abilities apiece.

You can attack with this power by picking up a knife or heavy object and using your Telekinesis instead of Scuffling. Alternatively, you can shove someone away (Difficulty 4 for an average person, more for a supernatural creature); this does -3 damage, but gives you the opportunity to flee.

When you use this power, you're likely to bleed from the nose or eyes. You may also experience considerable static discharge, with little bolts of electricity leaping from your skin or hair to nearby metal objects. Spontaneous fires are also likely.

The ability can also trigger unconsciously, especially when you're first developing your powers. Many accounts of poltergeists and ghosts are the result of accidental Telekinesis.

Telekinesis and Terror: If you use Telekinesis immediately after losing 2 or more points of Stability, reduce the Difficulty of the test by the amount of Stability lost.

MIND CONTROL

You can seize control of the mind of another human being, turning them into your puppet. While their will is enslaved to yours, you can dictate their actions and even force them to answer your questions. Mechanically, it's a contest of your Mind Control against your target's Health. If you win, you get control of them until you release them, or they trigger another contest by spending 2 Health. It costs you 1 Stability for every round you maintain control.

When you've gained control of someone, you can substitute Mind Control for Bullshit Detector or Intimidation.

If you're forcing someone to pretend to be uncontrolled (say, Mind Controlling a police officer to unlock your cell doors and walk you out of jail, while telling his coworkers that you're all free to go), then you may need to spend Impersonation to make your puppetry convincing.

When using Mind Control, your eyes turn completely black — iris and sclera swallowed by the infinitely deep darkness contained within your brain. Use of this ability is a quick route to the madness and corruption of the Outer Dark. Humans aren't meant to have this sort of power.

Attempts to Mind Control a Creature of Unremitting Horror automatically fail and trigger an 8-point Stability test.

TELEPATHY

You can force your way into the mind of another person. Unlike abilities like Aura Reading or Sensitive, where you are a largely passive receiver of supernatural insight, Telepathy is an active, intrusive power. You might, at the whim of the GM, pick up the occasional flash of surface thought, but most of the time you'll have to choose whether or not to try Telepathy.

You must state in general terms what sort of thoughts you're looking for — you can't just try generally eavesdropping. It's the psychic equivalent of swimming blindly out into a wild ocean, instead of making for a particular island or shore.

The Difficulty for a Telepathy test varies, depending on the strength of will of your target, and how deep you

need to go. Assume a Difficulty of 4 for most thoughts, rising to 6 or more for deeply held secrets.

When you make a Telepathy attempt, you enter a trance state. This trance lasts only a few seconds, but subjectively seems to last much longer. In the trance, you find yourself in a psychic landscape based on the personality and memories of your target. Often this will initially appear to be a place familiar to your target, such as a childhood home. The thoughts or memories you're looking for will be here somewhere. Memories usually appear as written text, although you may also find a tableau that recreates a particularly intense memory. Present thoughts can only be read from one particular location in the dreamscape, usually one that has a symbolic or subconscious connection with the thoughts you're trying to read. If the dreamscape resembles a house, then information about your target's financial misdeeds might be found or overheard in the study, but his sexual desires might be found in the bedroom — or suppressed and buried in the basement.

As you explore this landscape, you'll encounter strange manifestations of your target's fears and desires, as well as obstacles or puzzles blocking your way to the information you seek. You'll need to use other Investigative Abilities to traverse this mental landscape. You can be injured or even killed in this dream world — any damage you suffer there reduces your Stability. You can enter a target's mind, reconnoiter the dreamscape, and then return to the waking world to prepare for a later attempt.

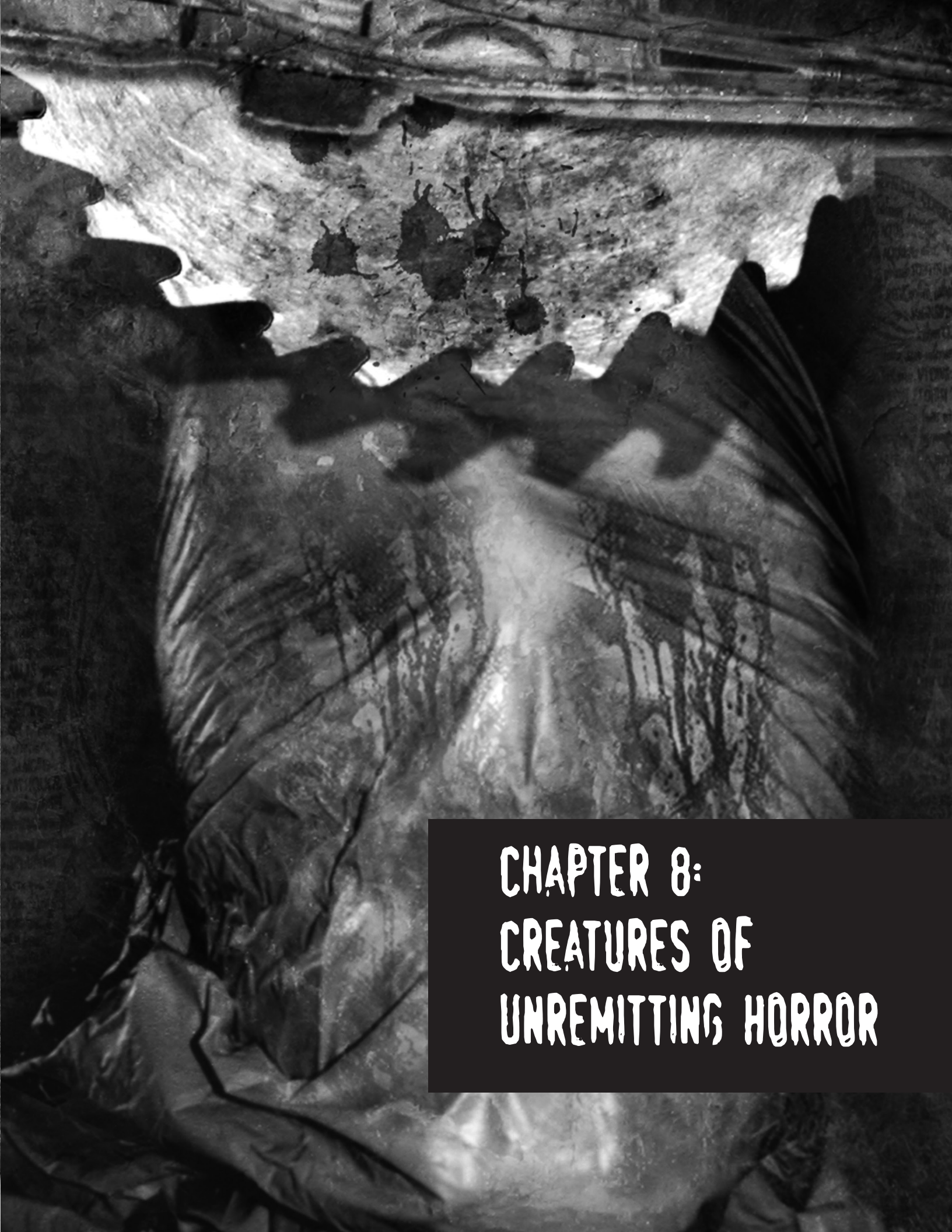
Telepathy and Mysteries

Unrestricted mind reading short-circuits most mysteries. If the psychic can just scan suspects until she finds the murderer, there's no need for investigation. This take on Telepathy effectively gives the investigators a second avenue of investigation to follow (*"We can prove Bob's the murderer if we find evidence that he was there on the night of the killing — or if we can sneak into his mind and work out what that armless statue means to him, then maybe that'll unlock the memory of that night."*)

Keep telepathic jaunts short — it's better to have the Telepath attempt a second trip after the other players have had a chance to offer suggestions.

Running telepathic scenes requires improvisation of mysteries and psychodrama; if that doesn't fit with your GMing style, disallow Telepathy as a power.

Your target subconsciously recognizes your presence in their mind and attempts to eject you after a few seconds; stealing closely guarded thoughts or memories will almost inevitably require repeated attempts, and repeated intrusions mean they know who you are. Using Telepathy on a Creature of Unremitting Horror results in an 8-point (or more) Stability test. It works, but you won't enjoy it.

A black and white photograph of a body covered in a sheet, with dark stains on the surface above. The scene is dimly lit, creating a somber and unsettling atmosphere. The sheet is wrinkled and covers the body, with only the head area visible. Above the sheet, there are several dark, irregular stains on a light-colored surface, possibly a wall or ceiling. The overall composition is centered and framed by dark, shadowed areas.

**CHAPTER 8:
CREATURES OF
UNREMITTING HORROR**

Though many of the supernatural creatures encountered in *Fear Itself* are physically gruesome, all of them should be in some way psychologically upsetting — not just for the characters, but for the players as well. This effect is fairly easy to achieve if your players are readily creeped out by standard horror imagery. Many roleplayers are used to games of power fantasy, in which their cool abilities can be counted on to triumph against the forces of darkness. Simply by making them play ordinary people unequipped to deal with the nasty threats they face, you may create a sense of powerlessness that makes even the most prosaic creatures seem supremely horrifying.

If you're running the game for seasoned horror aficionados, on the other hand, you'll have to work to crank up the sense of unease. Avoid standard or overused monsters, or put a new, sickly modern spin on existing tropes. Think more Clive Barker than H. P. Lovecraft. Each writer created beasts that were skin-crawling for their time, but Lovecraft's Cthulhu creatures have been so well loved in gaming fandom that they've become downright cuddly, losing their squirming psychosexual overtones. When creating creatures, use contemporary frankness concerning issues of violence and sexuality to push your players' buttons.

The Unremitting Horror mythology designates most creatures as denizens of the Outer Dark, a bleak, distant plane of existence utterly hostile to human life. Its beings come to our reality to feed and to play. Variations of this mythos can be explored in the upcoming *Ocean Game* adventure collection; *The Dispatchers* (p. 164), and it plays tangentially into *The Circle* (p. 107) and *Glass Beach Summer* (p. 141).

This section runs through the creatures' main stats, and presents a few sample creatures. For more, see the companion volume to this book, the *Book of Unremitting Horror*.

Scary numbers

Treat Aberrance, Health, Scuffling, and other creature stats as rough guidelines, not hard rules. Sometimes you'll need to give a monster 1 or 2 more Health points to get in one last attack, or some extra Aberrance so it can tackle a remarkably lucky and resilient player character.

It's reasonable to ask why we give numeric values to creature abilities, if we're just going to ignore them in play. The reason is that a creature that appears limited, if that limit is elastic, feels more like a genuine challenge than one that functions purely according to the whim of the GM. If a Torture Dog is utterly immune to mundane weapons and can teleport at will, it's less of a monster and more of a plot device that can only be overcome if the players do what's expected of them by the GM. A Torture Dog with actual game stats can be overcome with a clever plan.

It's something of a psychological cheat on both sides, but it works. Keeping the abilities capped forces the GM to think about the monster's limits and tactics, as well as its strengths; being able to tweak the abilities ensures the GM can push the horror where needed.

ABERRANCE

Creatures of Unremitting Horror have a special ability called Aberrance. It measures their capacity to abuse and torment the strictures of reality, warping the world around them according to their cruel whims. Mechanically, it's what is used to power or measure their supernatural abilities. A creature might have to make an Aberrance test or pit its Aberrance against a player character's Stability to achieve some horrific effect, or spend a few points of Aberrance to trigger a power.

GENERAL ABILITIES

As well as Aberrance, all monsters have Health ratings, and most will have at least Scuffling and Athletics too. These abilities work just like those of player characters. You may want to have some monsters vanish or die at 0 Health; for others, it may be scarier to have them stumble on at negative Health, desperate to land one final blow as they die.

Monster abilities refresh fully every 24 hours. If the investigators pursue a monster back to its lair after an earlier encounter the same day, allow the monster to refresh half its lost points.

Creatures do not have Stability ratings. They are, by any standards, already insane.

HIT THRESHOLD

The Difficulty of any attempts to hit the monster with Shooting or Scuffling; usually 3. If a monster's Aberrance or Athletics is 8 or higher, or if the monster is especially fast or elusive, increase its Hit Threshold.

ARMOR

Some monsters are extremely resilient, and reduce all damage they suffer by

an amount equal to their Armor rating. So, a creature with Armor 2 who's shot for 6 points of damage would only lose 4 Health.

Other creatures are supernaturally resilient, or only vulnerable to a particular form of attack. A creature might be immune to bullets, resistant to other physical attacks, but take damage from light. Any such protective abilities get listed here.

For example, Torture Dogs have +2 Armor against Shooting attacks, but only +1 Armor against Scuffling.

AWARENESS MODIFIER

In GUMSHOE, creatures and GMCs don't make Sense Trouble rolls to hear sneaky investigators. Instead, the player characters make Infiltration tests to sneak around, and the Difficulty of the Infiltration test is altered by the monster's Awareness Modifier.

For example, a Torture Dog has an Awareness Modifier of +1. It's hard to sneak past a Torture Dog, so the Difficulty for any such tests increases by 1.

STEALTH MODIFIER

Similarly, in keeping with the GUMSHOE principle of players rolling whenever possible, a monster's Stealth Modifier affects the Difficulty of Sense Trouble tests to anticipate its attacks.

DAMAGE MODIFIER

Damage inflicted by monsters is described like any other weapon, as a modifier to a d6 roll. So, if a monster with +2 claws hits a victim, roll a six-sided die and add 2 to the result to determine the amount of Health lost. Many monsters have several different attacks with different Damage Modifiers.

Some creatures have multiple attacks. If a creature has more than one attack of the same type (two Scuffling or two Shooting attacks), it can use both at the same time, but it can only spend half as many points on one attack as it does on the other. For example, Torture Dogs have both a drill (+1) and a mandible (+3) attack. If the Torture Dog uses both attacks in the same round, and spends 4 Scuffling on its mandible attack, it can't spend more than 2 points on its drill attack.

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Any attacks or other special-case abilities possessed by the monster get listed here. Often these abilities have a cost in Aberrance or some other General Ability, limiting how often the monster can draw on them.

ALL THAT REMAINS

This section lists physical evidence and other clues that might be left behind by the monster. Discovering these clues might reveal how to defeat or evade

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the creature — or might only allow the doomed victims to comprehend and circumscribe the horror that will consume them.

For some monsters, a clue might reveal what's referred to as a **Special Means of Dispatch**, a method of killing or defeating an otherwise invincible monster. Just as werewolves can be wounded by silver, or vampires repelled with a cross, some Creatures of Unremitting Horror have special weaknesses that can be exploited by a brave soul.

EXAMPLE CREATURES

THE MYSTERY MAN

*You can call me Hungerwood.
You're my toys now.
I like to break my toys.*

The term "Mystery Man" is a catchall for a class of alien entity of near god-like power, who delights in psychological torture and degradation. Each individual has its own specific name.

Mystery Men drive people mad for pleasure. A Mystery Man seeks out individuals, often in a group, whom he deems susceptible to psychological breakdown, yet of sufficient depth and interest to make the effort entertaining. Once he targets a victim or victims, he loses (or perhaps only willingly abandons) the ability to interfere directly with their minds. His goal is to drive them over the edge incrementally, through a series of ever nastier psychological manipulations. He could pulp their brains immediately simply by opening a psychic link between his mind and theirs, but what delight would there be in that? Then he'd merely have to find another coterie of sufficiently entertaining targets. And those with the right balance of fortitude and weakness are hard to find. Likewise, he never launches direct assaults against them, though he may manipulate third parties into doing so. Physical violence is only a means to a more delectable end — emotional mutilation.

All Mystery Men enigmatically refer to this pursuit as the "Ocean Game".

After prolonged pursuit by a Mystery Man, PCs should be afraid that everyone they meet



might be one of his mental thralls, if not their ultimate antagonist in the spectral flesh. The Mystery Man can manifest in a variety of forms, adopting new ones at will.

In order to target a group of victims, the Mystery Man must introduce himself to them, though he may do so in stages, to heighten the tension. He suffers no obligation to explain

how he does what he does, nor to offer any explanation for his actions beyond his own psychic sadism.

Although he claims to be indestructible, the PCs may find old documents about the Mystery Man archetype suggesting that it is possible to destroy him, or at least to sever the bond between him and his victims. Unfortunately they never go into detail and usually conclude prematurely with the author's descent into gibbering lunacy.

Abilities: Aberrance 30

Hit Threshold: 5

Armor: 3

Awareness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: +2

Damage Modifier: -1

Aberrant Entity: Mystery Men are pure Aberrance; the antithesis of reason and mercy. They don't have any other General Abilities, not even Health. However, they can substitute Aberrance for any other ability — including Health, so damage to the Mystery Man reduces his Aberrance. A Mystery Man reduced to 0 Aberrance must return to the Outer Dark and may not torment his previous victims for a time.

The Man Who Wasn't There: Mystery Men can appear or vanish at will, as long as they're unobserved. So, he can't disappear when you're looking at him, but if he walks around a corner, or a passing car blocks your view of him, he can vanish. It costs a Mystery Man 1 Aberrance to vanish; it costs 1 or more Aberrance to appear somewhere. Different Mystery Men have different taboos restricting where they can or can't appear. Some might be baffled by a victim taking refuge on holy ground in a church; another might have difficulty in crossing running water, or be defeated by the presence of an innocent child. Investigation and research can discover what blocks a Mystery Man from appearing in a particular place.

Distort Reality: The Mystery Man can alter the physical environment around an individual. This is not an illusion, though he can turn off the effect at will when others approach, making it seem to the victim like a hallucination. Because the alterations to the surrounding area are objectively real, attempts by the victim to disbelieve what she beholds or to wake up from the nightmare are doomed to fail.

The limits of this effect roughly map to the victim's line of sight. Use of binoculars or other sight-extending equipment

by the victim merely increases the area the Mystery Man can alter. If the target moves, the Mystery Man can move the effect so that the environment continues to distort as she travels. He can place a victim back inside a traumatic memory from the past, make the walls of a house breathe and sweat, or turn a forest into a dark wood of reaching, hungry trees. If he wishes to insert other characters into the scenario, the Mystery Man must manifest in the desired form, or use other people enthralled with his Pull the Strings ability (below), altering their appearance as his twisted scenario demands.

The scale of the changes determines the Aberrance cost for this ability. Small tweaks and gradual changes cost only 1 or 2 points of Aberrance; if the Mystery Man is trying to attack a victim, then the amount of Aberrance spent determines the Difficulty of the test needed to escape the hazard.

Flawless Imitation: At the cost of 1 Aberrance, the Mystery Man can perfectly imitate any person he's observed for even a few fleeting moments. The imitation looks, sounds, even smells like the original, right down to body language. Characters can spot the fake by noticing out-of-character behavior. **Bullshit Detector** tells them that something is off about the imitation's statements, but does not outright reveal him as the Mystery Man. Only after the character (or player) voices the thought that this might be the Mystery Man does the illusion take on flaws. Now the imitation looks mostly like the original, but with horrible, distorted qualities. Your "mother's" flesh suddenly becomes sallow and purulent. Your pig-tailed "niece" reveals a set of sharp fangs, and so on. This effect calls for a 4-point Stability test.

Pull the Strings: At the cost of 1 Aberrance, the Mystery Man may dominate the mind of any GMC. He can force new behavior, including complex actions. He can extract memories, implant new ones, even change the victim's personality. This effect is permanent, if the Mystery Man wants it to be.

ALL THAT REMAINS

History: The handwritten diary is confused and contradictory, and many sections are unreadable due to water damage. The unnamed narrator describes meeting an "unpleasant stranger" shortly before descending into insanity. Entries describe "melting doors," "the choking gardens," and "the city below." From what you can gather, the writer was confined to

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a madhouse for stabbing her father, although she insists that it wasn't her father, and that he's not dead. It ends with a promise to pursue the stranger to "Briny Heaven."

Occult Studies: There are accounts of trickster spirits and gods who work through illusions and mockery. Such creatures usually have rules and taboos they must obey, if only you can find them.

Reassurance: "You believe me, don't you? It was God. God tortured me. God hates me. And He's coming back for you."

Investigative Procedure: The victim clearly died from the fall; she dropped from a fifth-story window onto solid concrete. You can't account for why she was soaking wet with saltwater. Nor can you easily explain why all the witnesses insist she emerged from a *door*, not a window. How could there be an external door five stories up?

Photography: The black-and-white photograph is blurry, but shows a gangly man in a large hat, walking away down a country road. As you examine the photo, the figure of the man turns around and *looks* at you. He can see you through the photo! When you look again, the photograph now just shows an empty road.

OVVASHI

Cheers, fella. Sorry, I can never remember your name. Weird that. Where was I? Oh, right, yeah, ten years inside for something I never even done. Dying a bit more every day. When I came out, when I saw the sky and the streets again, that wasn't real. It still don't feel real now. I get angry all the time. I wouldn't be here if that judge hadn't taken one look at me and decided I deserved to go to prison. That's where "my sort" go, y'know.

He yawned. Just before he pronounced sentence, he yawned, like he was saying he wanted it over with. Then, ten years of my life go by in pure hell. You think you know what hell is? You don't. Do I want justice? Well, I'm a criminal now, inn'I? Wasn't before. Learned a few things when I was inside, though. Wonderful thing, the British penal system. And to think they say the kids don't get a decent education these days...

Look, mate, there's no justice. Not for you, not for me. It's all bollocks. It's just a pile of bullshit, and enough scapegoats behind bars to keep the Daily Mail readers happy.

I'll tell you something. Not joking this time. If I had a gun in one hand and the address of that judge in the other, I'd sort a bit of justice of me own out. That's all I really want. That's all that keeps me going. The rest of my life's just shit, really. No point lying about it. I don't suppose...

Ovvashi are humanoid demons who prey on society's refuse: drug addicts, the homeless, and the down-and-out. They appear as ordinary, almost painfully nondescript vagrants. Shuffling through places where the homeless congregate, they quickly find new friends, ensuring a warm welcome with their dirty plastic bags laden with cheap booze and smokes. Having won their confidence, they draw tales of woe from their newfound mates. To seal their allegiance, they withdraw from their bags the objects their victims most desire. Typical gifts include money, drugs, and food, but the Ovvashi are also capable of materializing very specific items, such as an exact replica of a long-lost memento, or even a particular photograph of an abandoned loved one.

The first gift comes without strings attached. After that, the Ovvashi's friends must perform favors to get more of what they want. The Ovvashi slowly turns the homeless group's members against one another, until they commit heinous and degrading acts of betrayal. It engineers a campaign of murder, with the least effective members of the group dying first. The demon uses its knowledge of the crimes it has inspired to keep its pawns hooked, doing its bidding until no one is left. The last derelict standing is killed by the gnashing, shark-like teeth of the Ovvashi itself, at which point it trudges off in search of a new band of the disenfranchised to destroy from within.

Abilities: Aberrance 12, Athletics 12, Driving 3, Filch 8, Fleeing 8, Health 20, Medic 8, Scuffling 15, Shooting 8

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: None

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifier: +0

Appear Innocuous: The Ovvashi looks like an ordinary derelict except for its multiple rows of triangular, shark-like teeth. It is, however, able to psychically influence those around it to ignore this glaring sign of its inhuman origin. Only characters who specifically state that they're closely examining the Ovvashi's features may notice the teeth. If this is essential to the plot, any character with **Notice** or **Outdoor Survival** gains the clue automatically. If not, the character must

spend 1 point of **Notice** to learn the horrible truth. Any characters seeing the teeth must then make a **Stability** test for seeing a supernatural creature.

Derive Power: Whenever a victim is killed by its machinations, the Ovvashi consumes its soul. It does this by taking a small portion of the remains, such as a fingernail or hank of hair, and smoking it in its pipe, which itself is carved from a bone of a previous victim. After smoking its victim's soul, the Ovvashi gains 12 points to distribute among its General Abilities. Unlike ordinary pool points, these cannot be refreshed. The Ovvashi retains them until they are spent, or until its



bone pipe is destroyed. The demon is extremely attached to the pipe and will negotiate for its return if stolen.

No psychic residue remains of a soul smoked by an Ovvashi. No ghost, no spirit, not even an emotional vibration, is left behind for Sensitives to detect.

Extract Secrets: By sitting and patiently listening to a person who regards it sympathetically, the Ovvashi can encourage the subject to reveal his deepest, darkest secrets. In most cases, the demon uses ordinary psychology. Where the subject holds tightly to his secrets, the Ovvashi can use supernatural means to impel the victim to spill the beans, making a **Aberrance** test against a **Difficulty** of 4.

Uncanny Preparedness: The Ovvashi can withdraw from its pile of plastic bags any object desired by a potential victim. It costs the Ovvashi 1 **Aberrance** point to conjure a common item; unusual or specific items (*"Here is the wedding ring she threw away, and here is the hand she threw it with"*) cost more.

Consumable items, including food, cigarettes, and drugs, work just like the real thing.

Items are limited in size to those that could credibly fit in an ordinary shopping bag. Items remain in existence for 24 hours only. The Ovvashi can wish them away before that time.

When it wants to pull out all the stops in manipulating a victim, it uses its **Extract Secrets** ability to work out exactly what item will arouse the most desperate need. When presented with their heart's desire, characters must do what they can to satisfy the Ovvashi and gain the item, or suffer the same **Stability** loss as if they ignored a **Risk Factor**. As they become crazier, the horrible acts proposed by the Ovvashi seem progressively more sensible.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Streetwise: Asking around, you hear stories about a "Mr. Fixer" or "Dirty Santa" who can get you whatever you want. All you have to do is want it badly enough.

Impersonate: Disguising yourself as a vagrant, you sleep under a bridge. During the night, you hear someone moving around in the shadows, breathing heavily. The rustling of a plastic bag. Moonlight reflects for a moment off its rows of sharp, sharp teeth. And then it's gone.

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But what's this? It's left something for you. What is it?

Medicine: Analyzing the burned remains, there's definitely human tissue in there, mixed with tobacco and some other substances you can't identify.

Negotiation: "Money? Shit man, I don't want your money. What does money mean any more? S'just paper. Gimme a secret. That's what we deal in now."

TORTURE DOG

"Sarge, the walk-in in interview room B — she just confessed to the Tower Hamlets murders."

"Another nutjob."

"But sir, she knows details that the press never got hold of. She knew about the books. About the guy who tried to climb out the bathroom window, and got dragged back. She knew what was written on the walls."

"How? How's some sixteen-year-old bint know all that? You know what forensics say — that it was at least six attackers, armed with power tools. Is she claiming to be an accomplice?"

"No sir. She says she did it herself. And, sir... I believe her."

These extra-dimensional hunter-trackers resemble giant mammalian cyborg weevils. Whirring power drills jut from between their oversized, prehensile mandibles. They use these to inject psychotropic toxins into the bloodstream of their victims, which heighten their consciousness of pain, while keeping them awake for marathon torture sessions.

As with all of the denizens of the Outer Dark, very little is known about Torture Dogs. They are believed to be trained hunter-killer creatures, dispatched in packs to bring down foes of particular status or significance, but this may be mere supposition. Other theories believe them to be information-gatherers, whose savage methods ensure that the victims can keep no secrets locked away.

Their minds operate according to an alien logic. For reasons of their own, they always spare one of their victims, although "spare" is perhaps a misleading choice of words. The dogs first inject their victims with a hallucinogenic drug, secreted from



their own glands. This has the effect of making a victim ultrasensitive to physical stimuli (so much so that he experiences some agonizing sensations as almost pleasurable) and links him telepathically with his torturers, so that he is forced to become an accessory to his own mutilation. Then he watches through their eyes and feels what they feel, as they peel back his skin and drill down to his bone marrow. This horrible fusion leaves the victim with a bizarre, intimate knowledge of the creatures' memories and experiences, even if he is too insane to articulate it.

Abilities: Aberrance 10, Athletics 8, Health 7, Scuffling 9, Shooting 6

Hit Threshold: 4

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

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: Scuffling +1 (drill), +3 (mandibles); Shooting +0 plus toxin (spines)

Dimensional Leap: Torture Dogs can glide along strange planes unknown to conventional science. By spending 1 point of Aberrance, they can leap from one place to another along a line that appears straight to them, but leaves the dog facing in the opposite direction, or on the other side of a solid wall. To an observer, the

dog appears to have jumped through some sort of wormhole or impossible angle in space. It is impossible to tell where the dog will appear from watching it jump. Torture Dogs always teleport flawlessly and do not have to see the place they're jumping to, although they have no precognitive awareness of what awaits them there. A Torture Dog can spring upon an opponent by using a dimensional leap, but must be able to see that opponent first.

If it chooses, instead of moving within the material plane, the dog may take a dimensional leap to return to the Outer Dark. The dog will not usually do this unless it has achieved what it came to the material plane to do, or it is severely wounded.

Horrific: Torture Dogs are steeped in the mind-wracking essence of human agony, and the fear that ordinary humans have of suffering. All Stability loss caused by them is at +1.

Toxin: The spines that a Torture Dog fires from its back transmit a potent toxin. Victims who are struck by the Torture Dog's spines risk having this poison sent coursing through their veins, as well as suffering Health damage. They must make immediate Health tests (Difficulty 5); on a failure, they are reduced to shivering, cowering wrecks, overcome by agony. The toxin heightens all sensations to an unbearable intensity, increasing the Difficulty of Stability tests by +2, and making it impossible for the victim to take any action at all.

The toxin also mentally fuses the recipient with the Torture Dog that delivered it. While the venom is seething in his blood, the victim can see, hear, and feel everything that the dog does. He not only gets to watch himself being devoured (or tortured), he gets to experience himself doing it, too. For the Torture Dog, this may bring some kind of voyeuristic satisfaction; for the victim, it is a living hell, and calls for a fresh Stability test every time the creature attacks.

After 1d6 hours, the toxin wears off but leaves the victim with permanent nerve damage, increasing the Difficulty of all Stability tests by +1. Immediate medical attention *may* help the victim and prevent this outcome, but a Medicine spend is needed to achieve this, along with a supply of antitoxins.

Telepathy: A Torture Dog may communicate telepathically with others of its kind, with its masters, or with a creature that it has poisoned with its toxin.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Notice: The single most puzzling aspect of a Torture Dog murder scene is the point of entry. There isn't one. Owing to the Torture Dogs' ability to glide through dimensions, there is never a break-in point. They simply manifest inside the room where their potential victims are.

It is, however, quite common for initial investigation to mistake the victim's hasty *exit* route for a point of entry. Victims try to flee the scene by smashing down doors, or even by opening windows and leaping out of them, jumping right through glass and all. In the messy chaos of the crime scene, it takes a sharp eye to discern that the damage was done from the inside to the outside, and not the other way around.

Forensic Anthropology: The victims of Torture Dog assault are thoroughly savaged, as if wild animals had attacked them. Deep gashes from claws and teeth are left in the flesh. Some victims are pulled limb from limb, as the dogs fight over the remains like chew toys. Not all of the wounds are this straightforward, though; among the tears and bite marks, there are occasional, deep puncture wounds that are frayed on the inside. These appear to have been caused by a sharp metal item rotating at high speed, the most obvious culprit being a conventional electric drill. Since no wild animal could possibly have a drill in its mouth, the usual conclusion is that the massacre was the work of a demented human and a pack of savage dogs, trained to rip humans apart. The size of the lacerations suggests that the dogs were one of the Great breeds, or possibly even wolves, though these would be less easy to explain in an urban setting.

Medicine: As noted above, the dogs leave one victim alive. If she is hospitalized within three hours of the attack, the blood samples reveal high concentrations of some hallucinogenic chemical in her body.

A typical attempt to reconstruct the events of one of these incidents would involve a human maniac injecting one victim with hallucinogens, killing the other victims with an electric drill, and setting his dog pack on the corpses, possibly in the hope that they would devour the evidence. The drugged state of the victim neatly accounts for her babbling about bizarre biomechanical creatures from the Outer Dark.

Reassurance: The one victim left alive after the Torture Dogs have faded through

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gaps in reality is barely recognizable as human, and babbles incessantly about the Outer Dark. This is mostly demented raving, but occasionally a sentence slips out that gives a clue to what the dogs are and what they want. Naturally, few can glean more than a few coherent sentences from them; the more forthcoming survivors may reveal that the Torture Dogs are from the "Great Razor Plains" and that they "glide along the agony breezes."

A listener with no experience of the Outer Dark would probably conclude that the victim was left alive as some sort of a cruel joke, or possibly as a warning to others. To a listener with some awareness of the Creatures of Unremitting Horror, the inference is very clear that the dogs leave a tortured victim as a warning, to give those who would interfere with the operations of the Outer Dark an idea of the fate that awaits them.

FAT GOLEM

"When's the baby due?" they mocked her as she walked to school.

She ran her hand over the rolls of flesh beneath her shirt. "Soon," she whispered to herself. Soon the other girls in the class, the thin ones, they'd swell with her stepchildren. They'd be like her.

And together, together, they'd make something beautiful.

Fat Golems build themselves. The entity starts as a single slug-like creature composed of a gelatinous yellow-white substance similar to human fat. When it breaks in from the Outer Dark, it finds a sleeping victim and enters through the nose, mouth, navel or anus, or via an existing incision such as an old surgery scar. It slowly congeals around the victim's gut, masquerading as natural weight gain, feeding from the host. This process fatally weakens the host's immune system over time, but that's a slow death. The host usually perishes six months to a year after the initial infection, and that's more than enough time for the creature to enter the second stage of its life.

It reproduces by fission, budding another slug, and another, and another. These secondary infections seek out their own hosts, usually people associated with the initial victim. A Fat Golem colony might infest a school, or a family, or a social circle — any group of people who regularly gather together are potential targets. These secondary infections are capable of reproducing, but don't; they just lie dormant, relying on the initial infection to spawn more slugs.

When there are enough slugs — half a dozen or so — then the creature reaches the second stage. The next time the hosts gather together, they fall into a trance and become unaware of their surroundings. This is merciful — no one needs to see a giant lump of fat oozing out of their stomach and combining with similar fat-slugs from the rest of their family. The slugs merge together into a humanoid shape, a Fat Golem.

This creature can take the approximate shape of any of its hosts. Its disguise isn't perfect — it can't change its skin tone, it doesn't have eyes or teeth or bones or any internal organs — but it's enough to wear clothes and pass for human in dim light. The Fat Golem then goes hunting for food. It kills people and eats them, then returns to its entranced host group and splits apart again into its constituent slugs. The slugs each return to their belly-nests, and the creature slumbers and digests its meal. Over time, it can produce more slugs without endangering the health of the secondary hosts.

Fat Golem slugs communicate telepathically — what one knows, they all know. They can influence but not control their victims, compelling them to gather together so it can emerge and combine into its golem form. Left unchecked, they eat and reproduce incessantly, unable to control their appetites.

The statistics below describe a Fat Golem; the individual slugs, while horrific, aren't that tough.

Abilities: Aberrance 7, Athletics 6, Health 30, Scuffling 15

Hit Threshold: 3

Armor: +3 vs. Shooting

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: -1

Damage Modifiers: +1 (fist)

Trance State: When a Fat Golem slug leaves its victim's body, it places the victim into a hypnotic trance. While entranced, the victim stares blindly off into space, or mindlessly performs a routine task over and over again, while the golem goes hunting. When the golem comes back and breaks apart to return to its nests, the victims fill in the missing time with false memories (*"We sat around on the couch watching movies all evening"*).

If the victims are aware of the golem, they can try to resist the trance. It's a contest of their Stability against the golem's Aberrance.

The golem can also choose to make entranced victims homicidally violent if disturbed. It only does this if it fears that its hiding place is in danger of discovery.

Impersonate: When the golem goes hunting, it takes the shape of one of its hosts. A **Notice** or **Bullshit Detector** spend spots the Fat Golem in a crowd; most people don't look too closely, and ignore the weird, greasy albino-like thing in their midst.



The golem borrows more than just physical appearance from its chosen model; it can perfectly mimic the victim's voice, and knows everything the victim knows. It even steals fingerprints and DNA from the chosen host, baffling forensic investigators.

Forcible Infestation: In combat, if the Fat Golem spends 3 extra Scuffling points, it forces one of its constituent fat-slugs into the body of a foe. The creature grabs the victim and covers their face with one giant, flabby, flipper-like hand. The slug then buds off from the main mass and wriggles down the victim's throat. This does no extra damage, but it's worth a 6-point Stability test, and the victim must then beat the Fat Golem in a contest of Stability vs. Aberrance or fall into a trance state, as described above.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Medicine: This makes no sense. The victim died of malnutrition, which is unusual but not impossible — just because someone's overweight doesn't mean they're getting the nutrients they need. What's confusing you is the fact that she weighed 250 pounds last week, and the body on the table weighs a third of that.



with photographs, newspaper articles, trophies, and other reminders of victims to trigger flashbacks in intruders. They also anonymously send such reminders to potential sources of guilt, and lurk nearby to feast on the psychic banquet. The Bystander regains 1 Aberrance for every point of Stability lost because of guilt trips like these.

Paralysis: By spending 2 Aberrance, the Bystander can “freeze” a single victim. The victim cannot move or act without winning a contest of Health or Stability against the Bystander’s Aberrance. Winning such a contest with a margin of 3 or more breaks the spell completely, but if the victim wins with a margin of 2 or less, the victory buys only a single action, and the paralysis takes hold again a moment later.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Photography: Wait a moment — that guy in the hat is in all these photographs of traffic accidents.

Social Sciences: The bystander effect is a well-known phenomenon — the Kitty Genovese case is the best-known example. This does seem to be an... unnatural example of it, though.

Notice: There’s no stamp or postmark on this envelope. Someone *hand-delivered* that little girl’s teddy bear. Someone knows I could have saved her, and didn’t.

WASTELANDER

TRANSCRIPT OF RECORDING FOUND IN PINE BARRENS

It’s... it’s... I don’t know. Day four. Five? We had to abandon the cabin. There was a fire. Darren. He set it on fire. Set himself...

We’re going to try walking to the highway. Maybe Steph came back for us in the van, or else we’ll have to hope there’s someone else on the road.

It’s following us. I’ve seen it, in the trees. It’s big and hairy. Bigfoot, it’s fucking Bigfoot, but Sam insisted that it was a cave man, a Neanderthal or something. He tried fucking talking to it. He was the first to go. Steph’s gone, and Sam’s gone, and Darren’s gone, and now it’s just myself and Mike.

I think I hate Mike.

It’s human disbelief, human rationality, that makes the Membrane. By refusing to contemplate the horror of the Outer Dark, we walled it off from our world, sealed it away.

There are weak spots and breaches in many places. These days, the worst breaches are in our cities, where despair and disillusionment and the machinations of the Esoterrorists erode and degrade the Membrane. But there are also gaps out there in the empty places, in lands where human disbelief and rationality were never significant factors in the psychic landscape.

You’re most likely to pick up a Wastelander if you’re somewhere *very* far from the tribe. The Antarctic. The middle of the desert. The deep ocean. If you’re unlucky, though, you might attract the attention of a Wastelander when out in the tamed wilderness, in a national park, or isolated part of the countryside. Your presence in that empty place briefly reinforces the Membrane, trapping the Wastelander on this side and forcing it to manifest in our world.

It manifests as the wolf, the beast, the wild man. A hairy, feral thing, stinking of piss and blood. Roughly humanoid in shape, maybe, but

Fear Itself



it moves and sounds like a big animal — an animal in pain. Unlike other Creatures of Unremitting Horror, Wastelanders don't *want* to be in our reality. Their time is gone; the wild times are gone. A trapped Wastelander wants to escape, but you've trapped it by smearing *human* all over the empty spaces.

To get home, it needs to ride a human soul back across the Membrane. It needs to turn one of its victims into a beast, to strip away all civilization, all rationality, all humanity. Its usual practice, then, is to trap a group and torment them until one of them turns on the rest, or until there's only one left. It then leaps on the shoulders of this last survivor, and the pair stagger out into the wilderness, never to be seen again.

Abilities: Aberrance 8, Athletics 16, Health 18, Scuffling 15

Hit Threshold: 4

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

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: +2 (giant club), +1 (claws)

Wild Curse: The Wastelander can spend 1 Aberrance to cause any mechanical or electronic device to malfunction. It can also whip up terrible weather, causing blizzards, floods, storms, or whatever extreme weather phenomena are suitable for the area.

Survival Instinct: Anyone near a Wastelander finds their savage instincts are much closer to the surface. Any player may swap 1 point of Stability for 1 point of Athletics, Fleeing, or Scuffling. Swap 2 Stability for 1 point of Outdoor Survival.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Outdoor Survival: Looks like the remains of a small camp. Three two-person tents, all smashed. Five corpses. And a trail of prints in the snow, leading deeper into the forest.

Science: These weather patterns are bizarre. It's like the whole storm is following us...

Mechanics: There's no reason for this gun to have jammed. It should be working fine.

Humanities: It's trying to break us down! Turn us against one another!

SKINNER

"It's terrible," says your brother. "The things people do."

He has no idea. He doesn't know where you go at night. He doesn't know you were out until six in the morning, flashlight in one hand, creeping around an abandoned factory. Looking for the thing's lair.

He paws at the tablet screen, scrolling down through the news article. He seems almost drunk to you, but you don't trust your own perceptions. Not when you're this sleep-deprived. The coffee's the only thing keeping you awake; your consciousness feels like a punctured balloon that you have to keep pumping up with caffeine.

"I mean, look at this." He shows you a photograph of one of the victims. "The things people do."

You don't want to look at it. You don't want to be reminded that you failed to save another one.

"I've got to go to work," you say, "and I've got, got..."

What's the excuse you use with him? Which lie was it? What did you tell him? You had it all worked out, a perfect way to compartmentalize your monster-hunting crusade away from your normal life, but you're too exhausted to remember it.

"I've got a, a thing," you finish lamely.

"Really." The word slithers from his mouth, thick and slow, marbled with doubt. He puts down the tablet.

"I know where you go at night," he says. "I know what you do."

For a moment, you panic — does he think you did it, that you skinned all those people? He knows you've been taking fighting lessons.

But no:

"I want to help," he says. "You should introduce me to your friends."

In its exposed form, a Skinner stands eight feet tall, with a face like a horse's skull. It has no skin of its own; you can see every black vein, every bulging muscle, every dripping orifice. In its hands — you cannot ignore the monstrous elegance of the anatomy of the fingers, so deft and strong, the articulation of every blood-smear joint visible — it carries a massive skinning knife, two feet long and immensely heavy, made of some alien metal.

Skidders kill their victims, remove the skin, and wear it as a disguise. Some sorcery of the Outer Dark allows the titanic monster to cram itself down inside its next human suit. It then sews up the cuts with coarse twine — there's no mistaking a disguised Skinner if you see it naked, so they hide the sutures beneath clothing. It shucks its previous disguise (if any), although it often uses the old skin as a bag to stash the gutted remains of its most recent kill. The skinning knife won't fit inside a stolen skin, so the Skinner must carry the knife with them or stash it somewhere.

Skidders take a perverse delight in observing the aftermath of their murders — they cannot help returning, again and again, to the site of a kill. If a police detective investigates a kill, the Skinner is drawn to kill and become that detective's husband or child. If it kills your brother, it'll then kill and become your sister too, so it can observe your grief. They taunt their hunters before becoming them.



They are canny monsters, with a deeper understanding of human thought than most of the other intruders from the Outer Dark. Skidders often recruit scapegoats or allies for their killings, taking on the shape of loved ones to manipulate these patsies.

Stolen skins begin to smell after a week or so, prompting the Skinner to move on to another victim. They can hide in animal hides if necessary, but they prefer murdering humans.

Skidders are immensely strong and resilient. The one weapon they're especially vulnerable to is their own skinning knife.

Abilities: Athletics 12, Health 30, Scuffling 15

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: +2 vs. Shooting, -3 vs. the skinning knife

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: +1 (fist), +3 (skinning knife)

Fear Itself

ALL THAT REMAINS

Medicine: The bones in this cadaver are those of a male child, approximately eight years old. So are the internal organs, down to the *internal* genitalia. The skin and external features of the cadaver are those of a woman, probably in her late 20s. Somehow, the woman's skin fitted perfectly around the child's body, although you're at a loss to explain how, and you certainly can't replicate it. There's just too much skin.

You're dealing with two victims here — but they both died in exactly the same way. The stab wounds are a perfect match.

Outdoor Survival: Whoever killed and skinned this dog was an expert. They got the poor beast's hide off in just a single cut.

Notice: There's this stringy bit of black thread that keeps flopping out of your mother's sleeve when she eats. She notices you staring at it and smiles widely. Then she picks up the knife.

Investigative Procedure: All these victims were killed by the same murder weapon. Find that knife, and you find the killer.

CUCKOO MOTHER

You had strange dreams when you were younger. They made you laugh. Men in strange clothes, doing things with bags of sugar, or with these flat, touch-screen computers. Your mother said you watched too much science fiction, spent too much time playing inside with your computer. Can't you be more like your brothers, she said?

You never got on with her, with any of them. You didn't belong there.

As you got older, the dreams stayed the same. It was the world that changed.

Now you're very close. You walk the streets, looking for familiar faces.

Looking for where you belong.

She looks human, apart from the wings and the claws. A harpy, maybe; a bloated, stinking bird-woman lying

on the mattress, legs spread. Her bulging eyes are glossy — there's very little intelligence behind them, just instinct.

Imagine the worst kind of monster — as bad as a human can get. Say he wants to escape his life — maybe he's dying. Maybe he's on the run from the law. Maybe he's got debts he can't pay. Maybe he's just fucked everything up. He finds a Cuckoo Mother, and he has sex with her.

(This only works for men. Only men can run away like this.)

So, he ejaculates into the cloaca of the bird-woman-thing, and a child is conceived. Here's the thing — the child gets conceived *in the past*, in the body of another woman. It'll be someone nearby, in the same city. And it'll be between fifteen and thirty years ago. His child, his cuckoo child, will gestate in the womb of this unknowing woman — has gestated, gestated years ago. By the time he withdraws from the Cuckoo Mother, the child he's made is grown.

Physiologically, the cuckoo child is his offspring, him and the Cuckoo Mother. A DNA paternity test would give him away, if it came to it. However, the incubator, this other woman he's forced into unwittingly bearing his cuckoo child, rarely has good reason to suspect anything's amiss. She has no reason to suspect that he's hijacked the conception of the child she should have had and replaced it with a cuckoo.

Spiritually, he and the cuckoo share the same soul. As the cuckoo grows up — *grew up*, it's already happened — he or she had strange dreams. Memories of another life, memories of the future.

In the moment of orgasm, he gets a vision of what the cuckoo child looks like *now*. It's reciprocal — the cuckoo child sees him too. From that moment, he's on a time limit. The two share the same soul, and now that they've "seen" each other, a confrontation is inevitable. Only one of them can survive.

He's got to complete the transfer, push the rest of his soul into his cuckoo child. If he succeeds, he'll *become* his offspring. He'll get a new, healthy body, a second chance. If he fails, if he can't make the jump, then he dies. The cuckoo child will consume him and his former body will just stop. He'll be reduced

to a passenger, a forgotten fragment at the back of the cuckoo child's mind, like a strange dream lost upon waking.

How does he force a soul transfer? That depends on the soul. Maybe he's got to force the child to love him. Maybe he's got to cut the child off from its adopted family. Maybe the child needs to be blooded. Maybe it needs to go through the same life-defining events he did.

The important thing to do, though, is to make sure that no one kills the Cuckoo Mother. She has to be present when the soul transfer is consummated. She's the psychopomp who'll carry the remaining portion of his soul into the vessel he made with her.

Where did he find a Cuckoo Mother? Oh, there are ways. Summon one, if he's got the talent. Hire one — there are brothels that cater for unusual clients. Or if he's got the money, there are high-end clinics run by certain organizations that take care of the whole affair for a



price. They keep the Cuckoo Mothers in gilded cages, have detectives who'll find your child based on photos of the father when he was younger, psychologists who'll assist with the soul transfer. If he's really desperate, he can just go looking around derelict orphanages and abandoned maternity hospitals, listening for the rustle of feathers and the mindless cooing of the Cuckoo Mother.

Abilities: Aberrance 6, Athletics 4, Fleeing 8, Health 8, Scuffling 6

Hit Threshold: 3

Armor: +0

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: +1 (claw)

Soul Transfer: The Cuckoo Mother can complete the bizarre sacrament of soul transfer by engaging in an Aberrance contest against her child's Stability. She gets a bonus to her roll based on the degree to which the child's father has prepared the cuckoo child to accept the totality of the soul (+0 for no attempt whatsoever, all the way up to +8 if the child's willing to be annihilated and she only needs to overcome some vestigial survival instinct).

Mother's Mercy: Cuckoo children can't attack their mother without making a Stability test (Difficulty equals her current Aberrance pool).

ALL THAT REMAINS

Medicine: The child's bones are unusually fragile and light, as if they were hollow.

History: The little girl has detailed memories of events that happened before she was born — and that haven't happened yet.

Streetwise: There's a building downtown — it looks like a private hospital. High security, guards everywhere. The weird thing is, there's a room on the top floor with these big windows. They're covered, but sometimes, when the light's just right, you can see the shapes of huge wings flapping around in there.

Occult Studies: You're familiar with the Orphic religions, right? Reincarnation. Metempsychosis — the transmigration of souls. And the phoenix, of course — a bird born out of the ashes of its own death, forever renewed.

OTHER CREATURES

These monsters may be too familiar and comfortable to disconcert and disturb jaded horror aficionados, but work great in a one-shot game where familiarity is a virtue. And, of course, a surprising twist or fresh presentation can turn even the most worn-out monster into something terrifying...

SLASHER

He knows what you did. And he's going to punish you for it.

Abilities: Aberrance 8, Athletics 12, Health 12, Scuffling 12

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: +1

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: +1 (big knife) or +2 (chainsaw)

Slasher Movement: Spend 1 Aberrance to appear somewhere unlikely. (He's inside your house.) Those nearby get a Sense Trouble test to realize something's wrong. Alternatively, for 2 Aberrance, the Slasher gets to burst out of some hiding place and make a free attack on a victim. This power can also be used to vanish; it costs 1 point to disappear, but the Slasher has to be unobserved when vanishing.

Not Dead Yet: If reduced to 0 Health, the Slasher can come back if he has any Aberrance left. Spending 1 Aberrance buys him 2 Health; if he spends 2 Aberrance, he gets to make a surprise attack on the character who "killed" him, as long as that character isn't the only surviving player character.

WEREWOLF

When the moon rises, so does the beast.

Abilities: Athletics 12, Health 15, Scuffling 15

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: -2 (-3 vs. silver)

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +2

Damage Modifier: +2 (bite)

Savagery: Spend 3 Athletics to make another attack, or to go first in combat.

Howl: When the wolf howls, it's a 2-point Stability test.

ZOMBIE

Brains...

Abilities: Aberrance 5, Health 4, Scuffling 4

Hit Threshold: 3 (2 for slow zombies, 4 for fast zombies)

Armor: +2 (Spend 2 extra Shooting points to go for a headshot that ignores Armor)

Awareness Modifier: -1

Stealth Modifier: +2

Damage Modifiers: -2 (bite) or -1 (claw) or +0 (grab)

Grab: A zombie can grab an enemy instead of dealing damage. While grabbed, the Hit Thresholds of both zombie and victim drop by 2. Break away from a grab with an Athletics (or Fleeing) contest against the zombie's Scuffling.

Bite: Infected victims may become zombies if they take damage from a bite.

MAKING YOUR OWN MONSTERS

Think of *Creatures of Unremitting Horror* as scenarios *in potentia*. A good monster needs a compelling hook, a challenging mystery, a trail of clues, and a bloody finale.

The hook for a monster might be:

- The grisly discovery of a corpse, killed in an unusual way
- The testimony of a witness who saw something horrific
- The events that led to the monster emerging from the Outer Dark to torment our world
- The actions of foolish or twisted humans who think they can use the monster — or are willing to be used by it (Esoterrorists)

The mystery that must be solved for a monster might be:

- Who is the monster targeting? Who's its next victim?
- Where is the monster hiding?
- What does the creature want? (Or better yet, what does it want from *us*?)
- How do we kill it?
- How do we escape it?

The trail of clues leading to the monster could involve:

- Weird physical evidence left by the monster
- Autopsies of victims
- Correlation of weird phenomena
- Observation of patterns — if a monster lives in the rain, and only manifests in a downpour, then tracking bad weather leads the investigators to the horror
- Testimony of eyewitnesses
- Historical accounts and descriptions of previous incursions
- Dreams or psychic impressions

The bloody finale may involve fighting, escaping, or being eviscerated by the monster, and is more the province of General Ability action than investigation. The clues bring the investigators to the monster, and may help them learn what they need to do to survive, but nothing's certain.

DESCRIBING MONSTERS

Saying a monster should be “scary” or “horrifying” is redundant. This is a horror game — it's taken as read that you're trying to scare people. Instead, think about *how* the monster is scary. Is it:

- **Creepy:** Just a bit wrong. Something familiar, but twisted. Something you glimpse out the corner of your eye. Something that looks almost human, but it's not quite right. For creepy monsters, try to engineer things so the players see the monsters earlier in the adventure, but don't realize what they're seeing until it's too late. Bystanders (p. 90) are creepy — the player characters might encounter them without knowing they're in the presence of a monster. For creepy monsters, come up with one small tell, some tiny detail that's just so wrong that it reveals the presence of Unremitting Horror.

- **Gory:** Blood-smeared, gushing caustic fluids, skin-flaying, chunk-tearing, body-part-popping, visceral horror. Here, it's all about what the monster does to its victims. Roleplaying games aren't a visual or tactile medium, though, and it's hard to get a shocking reaction through description alone. Saying “*Suddenly, blood cascades from the ceiling*” is unlikely to shock players, even though it might be really terrifying on a movie screen. Instead, take advantage of the nature of the medium and force the players to get their metaphorical hands dirty by having to interact with the gore. They've got to pull victims off spikes, or unthread eyeballs from barbed wire. Exploit the first-person viewpoint of roleplaying games — it's one thing to see a monster rip someone's arm off, but what if it's your arm?

You can also use foreshadowing to good effect — if the players find evidence that the monster has a cleaver, you're priming their imaginations to think about things being hacked and chopped. Anticipation of the gore can be as effective as the event itself. The Skinner, as it stuffs the meat and bones of its most recent victim inside the skin-sack of the previous one, definitely sounds gory.

- **Freaky:** Here, we're talking about monsters that violate how reality should work. Monsters that play with conventions of time and space. Things that shouldn't *be*. Serial killers that murder you

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in your childhood, erasing your life. Spider-things that grow *bigger* the closer they are to you. Houses with no exits. Freaky monsters take the players' unconscious assumptions about how reality works and rip them apart. The Mystery Men can be freaky — the fact that their reality-altering power appears to be tied to how far their victims can *see* is definitely freaky.

- **Disgusting:** May involve power tools, gross-out descriptions, vile organs, and other nastiness. Look to the natural world for inspiration — there are things that real-life insects do that are utterly awful if you scale it up. Disgusting and gory often go hand in hand — or quivering jelly-eggs laid in a blood-oozing maimed stump. Fat Golems are up there on the disgusting ladder.
- **Spooky:** Spooky monsters are less mind-shatteringly weird than freaky ones, and less subtle than creepy ones. They're all about unnatural events, about indirect attacks, about the impossible and uncanny being undeniable as they encroach on your life. Ghosts can be creepy or spooky, depending on how overt they are. (Whispers and glimpses: creepy; shattered mirrors reflecting dark-haired dead women and walls bleeding: spooky.)
- **Pitiful:** There's an interesting tension when a monster is both horrible and pathetic. If it makes you want to comfort it and kick it to death at the same time, then you're impaled on the twin horns of guilt and fear. In a better world, the player characters might be able to find a way to relieve the sufferings of the pitiful monsters and somehow release them from the torment of their own existence. In the world of *Fear Itself*, pity is a trap. The Cuckoo Mother (p. 94) is pitiful — she's sad and suffering, she's a victim too, but what she does is horrible.
- **Harrowing:** Harrowing monsters invade their victims' lives. Most other creatures show up only rarely in an adventure — if the player characters are chasing, say, an Ovvashi, then most of the adventure is going to be about investigating the results of the Ovvashi's machinations, then following those clues to the Ovvashi's victims, and from there tracking down the Ovvashi's hunting grounds, and learning more about the creature itself, and only at the very, very end of the game do the characters encounter the Ovvashi directly. The common metaphor is the layers of an onion — you peel away at the mystery, layer by layer, skin by skin, until all that's left is the monster.

A harrowing creature is the opposite of that — they're always there, always hammering at the player characters. No remorse, no safety. Fleeing doesn't help, or you can't flee. The monster's right at your door. If it's an onion, it's all tears.

Wastelanders (p. 91) are a good example of a harrowing monster — you could run a whole adventure that's just the player characters trapped in an arctic base or an old logging camp, under siege by a single Wastelander.

- **Unstoppable:** If every monster is invincible, the game becomes pointless. On one level, the players know that they're ultimately doomed and their efforts are futile, but they still expect a few victories along the way. They can't defeat the Outer Dark forever, but they can save this town, here and now. Similarly, the monsters they face may be incredibly dangerous and horrible, but there's a chance of defeating or escaping them. (A slim hope of victory is far scarier than no hope at all — if you know there's no hope, giving up is perfectly reasonable, but if you've got one tiny chance, you cling to it.) So, most monsters play fair — they're tough, but a sufficiently well-prepared, courageous and clever group of players has a chance of survival.

Unstoppable monsters don't play fair. They. Just. Don't. Stop. Traditionally, they move slowly, lumbering or lame, so you can run away from them, but that just delays the inevitable. Weapons and traps are useless against them. They don't stop.

You might even call them... unremitting.

The only way to escape such a creature is to be the last player character standing. You can't outrun it, but you can outrun everyone else...

A monster may fall into several of these categories. The ghost of a child that doesn't attack you, but just follows you around and never stops crying is creepy, spooky, pitiful, and harrowing all at the same time.

MONSTER RULES

When it comes to assigning abilities to monsters, keep the following in mind:

Aberrance: If you expect the players to have prolonged contact with the monster, then a

low Aberrance rating (1-7) and a way for the creature to regain Aberrance quickly in play is more interesting than a huge Aberrance rating. If the monster's only going to show up in one or two scenes, and there's little scope for it to refresh its Aberrance by feeding on victims, then just go ahead and give it enough to see it through the whole adventure in one gulp (8+).

Abilities: Monsters need Health and an attack ability (Scuffling or Shooting).

Don't give monsters Infiltration or Sense Trouble ratings — those are rolled into Awareness and Stealth Modifiers.

Every other ability is optional, although most monsters have Aberrance or Athletics.

As a rule of thumb, 3 points of a General Ability equals one guaranteed success (assuming an average Difficulty of 4). So, a monster with Scuffling 9 can be absolutely certain of hitting a player character three times.

Some GUMSHOE GMs like to assign attack patterns to their monsters in advance. For example, a creature might spend its Scuffling points thusly: 3, 1, 2, 2, 1. Its first attack is always a hit, then a wild swing, then a pair of focused attacks, then another wild swing.

For Health, remember that the average roll on a d6 is 3.5. So, an unarmed attack (Damage Modifier -2) does 1.5 points of damage on average; a big gun (Damage Modifier +2) reduces Health by 5.5 points on average, but could go as high as 8. Make sure a monster that's supposed to be scary can't be taken down by a single shot, or even a single concerted barrage of fire from all your player characters.

Hit Threshold: Most monsters have a Threshold of 4; those with a high Aberrance or Athletics go to 5; extremely hard to hit monsters can have a Hit Threshold of 6 or higher.

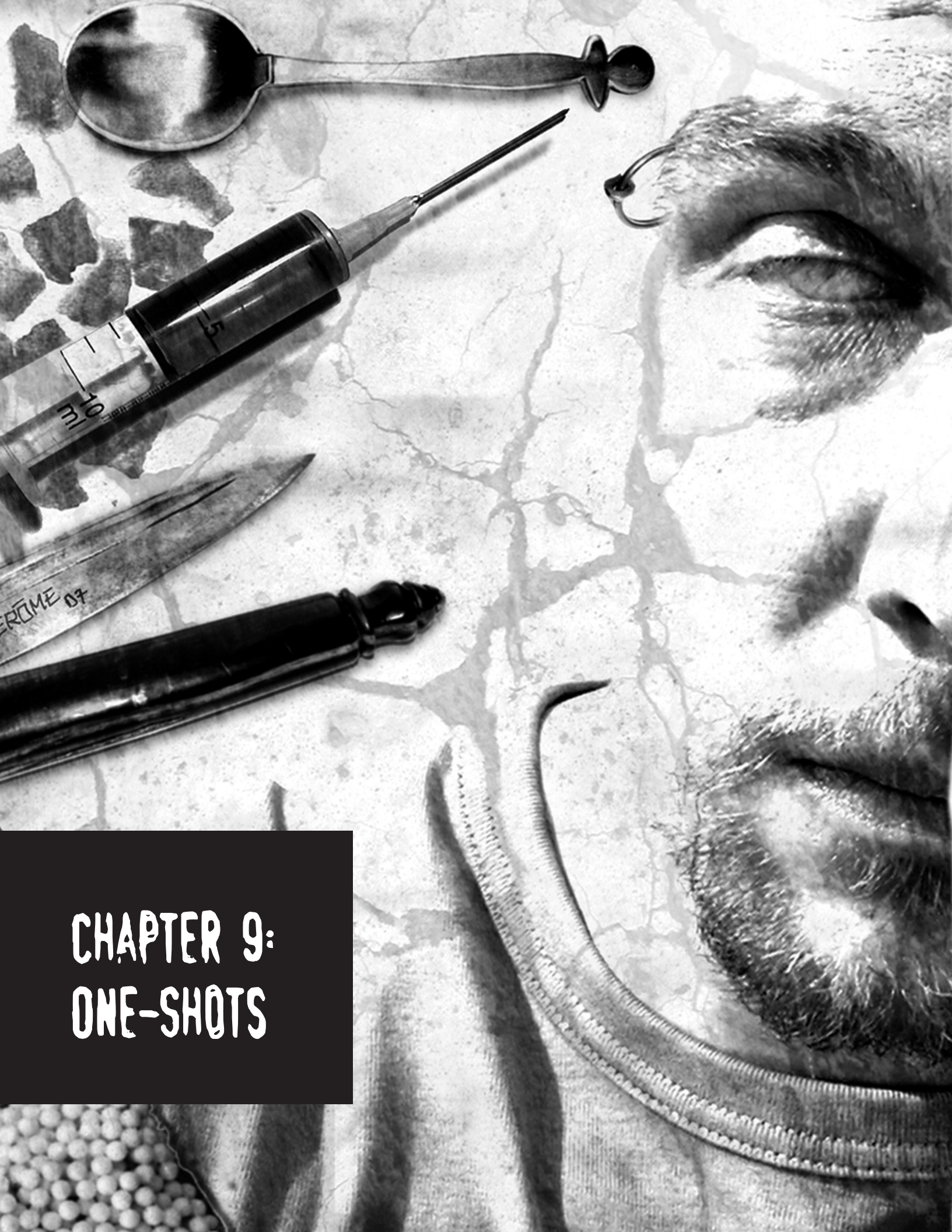
If you give a monster a Hit Threshold of 3, then it's big and slow (and should have plenty of Armor and Health to compensate).

Armor: High Armor is very effective in GUMSHOE; 2 or 3 points of Armor is plenty for even the toughest monster, unless the trail of clues leads to a rocket launcher.

Awareness Modifier: Only give a negative Awareness Modifier if the creature is blind or otherwise unable to effectively track its prey. (It's often useful to couple a negative modifier with a power that compensates — it's easy to hide from the blind monster, but it can spend Aberrance to smell fear, so it gets a big bonus to find the character with the lowest Stability.) A monster with an Awareness Modifier of +2 or more will rapidly drain the PCs' Infiltration pools.

Stealth Modifier: Similarly, give a monster a negative Stealth Modifier if you want to foreshadow its approach. The unstoppable monster dragging its hooked chain along the ground is easy to hear coming, but it's just as scary when you succeed as when you fail to Sense the approaching Trouble.

Powers: For your own monsters, you don't need to be as detailed or precise as our power descriptions. Just note down a few horrible things the monster can do, and run with that.



CHAPTER 9:
ONE-SHOTS

Single-session games can perfectly replicate the high body count and claustrophobic weirdness of horror movies. Freed from the burden of having to keep player characters alive so the players can play again next week, the GM and players can have fun buzzsawing through the cast or inflicting world-shattering consequences.

As one-shots are made to be played in a single session of three hours or so, they need to be efficient and focused in their delivery of horror. There's little scope for tangents or extraneous material. The game has to establish the characters, establish the setting, kick off the plot, bring the horror, and provide a satisfying story — all within a constrained time frame.

Accomplish this by using the structure of the one-shot to your advantage. You can tailor the player characters to the plot, and vice versa. One-shots are a great vehicle for exploring situations that would be too restrictive to support a longer game, such as:

- *You're all scientists on an isolated Arctic research base (or workers on an oil rig, or the crew of an oceangoing freighter, or hikers in the wilderness, or the crew of a starship about to make an unscheduled stop on a mysterious uninhabited planet...).*
- *You're the family and friends of a young child who's possessed by a demon.*
- *You're all patients in a psychiatric hospital, trying to grapple with past traumas.*
- *You're the young family who's just bought a new house at a bargain price, unaware of its grisly history.*
- *So, you've all just murdered this guy...*

Convention Games

One-shot games come into their own at game conventions. A table of friends can fall into its own familiar ruts and comfort zones — Bob always plays the tough guy, Neil's always the inquisitive one, Sarah falls into the leader role, despite her protests — or get easily distracted by socializing and out-of-game chatter. At a convention, you're likely to be playing with strangers who are eager to play, and more willing to embrace the pregenerated characters or stereotypes you give them. Running one-shot games at cons will not only hone your GMing skills, but can also produce superlative game sessions.

One caveat — you likely know your own players very well, and know what they're comfortable with and what they don't like. At a convention game, especially a horror game, be careful about what troubling elements you include in the game, and ask the players to let you know if something's making the game unfun for them.

CHARACTER CREATION

One-shots don't have time for detailed character creation. The sooner play begins, the better.

- One option is to use pregenerated characters. The GM works out the characters' abilities and traits in advance, and hands the players filled-out character sheets (or mostly filled-out; giving the players a handful of build points to play with gives them more investment in the mechanical side of the character, without slowing the game down).
- More ambitiously, the GM can write up backstories and roleplaying notes for these pregenerated characters. Keep these notes short (no more than one page each), so the players can quickly absorb them. The great reward from this extra effort is that the GM can create characters that fit perfectly into a particular adventure, designing their backgrounds and personalities for maximum impact.
- Alternatively, the GM can leave the choice of characters up to the players, as long as they pick a horror movie stereotype from the list on p. 102. This approach works better for cliché-driven horror games, which are no bad thing — clichés mean that everyone instantly understands the style of the game and what's expected of them, and so such games tend to run very smoothly. Include a mid-game twist (see p. 59) to keep everything from being completely predictable.
- When it comes to picking Sources of Stability (p. 16), tell the players to only select a single Source each at the start of the game, and make it a person. Have them come up with extra Sources in play if it becomes important.

ONE-SHOT RISK FACTORS

PREGENERATED CHARACTERS

Take a look at the sample scenario's pregenerated characters on p. 131. They all share the following traits, which you can use when designing your own pregenerated characters.

BREVITY

More than a page of text is excessive, and a sign you're trying to deliver too much backstory. Players should be able to pick up and play a pregenerated character very quickly — avoid giving them a lengthy reading assignment. If a pregenerated character's backstory is especially important or convoluted, consider taking the player aside for a private conference before the game starts.

Use language to convey the character's personality in your write-up. For example, in *The Circle* (p. 107), Ben Hunt's backstory is full of fragments and short sentences, suggesting he's a little disjointed. Sarah Bulzmann's write-up has more long sentences and is full of self-justification, implying she's educated but not especially trustworthy. Brian Curdy's uses buzzwords and jargon, emphasizing his youth.

CLEAR CONCEPT

A pregenerated character needs a one-line summary, sometimes called a logline, that the player can grab onto. All of the pregenerated characters in *The Circle* have a single strong core concept — journalist, veteran, student. Sarah Bulzmann's concept is a little harder to summarize, because she's more closely bound to the premise of the scenario and so has a more specific story role to play.

A REASON TO GET INVOLVED

All of the characters are part of the same drug trial. Using pregens means you can place the player characters in whatever dramatic situation best serves the game. You

can even start the game *in media res* — “you've all just robbed this bank/murdered this guy/participated in an occult ritual.” A pregenerated character should spell out *why* the character is present here and now.

VARIETY OF ABILITIES

Each character has a different set of Investigative Abilities, giving them a clear area of expertise. Even if you strip away name and backstory, pregenerated characters should still be clearly distinguishable from one another by focusing their abilities in different areas.

Furthermore, each character's area of expertise has a good chance of being relevant to the investigation. For example, Brian Curdy is positioned as a hacker and computer expert, so one of the suggested avenues of investigation is to hack into Bluegold Research's computers.

NECESSARY BACKSTORY

While the bulk of the mystery must be discovered in play, you can hide clues and foreshadowing in the players' backstories. This is especially useful if you want to include elements that would otherwise require stage-managing or directed scenes. For example, Brian Curdy's backstory describes how he was mugged and lost a few thaumazine pills. While this could be run as a scene in the game (a contest of Filch against Brian's Sense Trouble, perhaps), turning it into backstory ensures that the event unfolds as you want it to.

Also, it's fun to have some information come from the players, not the GM. Most of a game session consists of the players asking questions, and the GM answering. Here, Brian's player has secret knowledge that he can volunteer when he realizes it's relevant.

STEREOTYPES

Many players find it easy to dream up character concepts for high-flying space operas or gritty fantasy epics but become completely stumped when asked to invent perfectly ordinary people they might meet on the street. They may find it useful to pick from a list of common genre stereotypes¹. Astute readers will note that these

¹ In the case of other genres, it is the practice of game designers to flatter the audience and tell them that they're playing not the lowly stereotypes of lame pop culture, but the eternal, psychologically resonant archetypes of myth and literature. Forget that noise. Horror, especially in cinematic form, thrives on outright stock characters. This may be because it's a disreputable genre catering to hacky creative instincts, but more likely its use of stereotype goes hand in hand with the social/sexual anxieties the genre so often dabbles in.

are the same types that appear in teen movies. That's because most horror stories with multiple protagonists are marketed to the same teenage audience. Many groups may prefer to add dimension to these characters by putting a decade or so of age and life experience on to them. This gives you the postgraduate good girl, the aging jock, and so on.

Each stereotype costs 8 Investigative build points and 40 General build points, leaving the players with 20 General build points and 2+ Investigative build points to spend. All except the Authority Figure can buy Fleeing at the 2-for-1 discount.

GOOD GIRL

The good girl is an ordinary young woman. If not chaste, she's more modest and circumspect about her sexuality than the other young women in the cast of characters. Smart and cautious, she becomes the ultimate prize of the shadowy forces stalking the group — often proving herself more determined to survive than those around her.

Example: Jamie Lee Curtis, *Halloween*

Investigative Abilities: History 1, Humanities 1, Research 1, Social Sciences 1, Bullshit Detector 1, Flattery 1, Reassurance 1, Photography 1

General Abilities: Athletics 4, Driving 2, Fleeing 8, Health 7, Hiding 2, Medic 2, Preparedness 4, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 4, Shrink 2, Stability 9

SEXY GIRL

Dressing provocatively and always ready for a quick roll in the hay, the sexy girl acts as foil to the good girl. Often she's nasty in both senses of the word, rudely asserting her social superiority. The sexy girl often meets a grisly end typical of the genre's twisted version of Old Testament morality (*House of Wax*), but may evolve into a "better" person worthy of survival (*Creep*).

Examples: Paris Hilton, *House of Wax*; Franka Potente, *Creep*

Investigative Abilities: Law 1, Bullshit Detector 1, Flattery 1, Flirting 2, Intimidate 1, Streetwise 2

General Abilities: Athletics 4, Driving 4, Filch 4, Fleeing 6, Health 8, Infiltration 4, Scuffling 5, Sense Trouble 2, Shrink 2, Stability 6



Fear Itself

JOCK/STUD

The male equivalent of the sexy girl, the jock/stud is the socially dominant alpha male who typifies masculine values, often in a negative way. He is often paired with the sexy girl. He may prove himself worthy and die nobly, or establish himself as a shitheel and die ignominiously, but either way he's headed for the chopping block.

Example: Nicolas Le Phat Tan, *Sheitan*

Investigative Abilities: Humanities 1, Outdoor Survival 1, Trivia 1, Cop Talk 1, Flirting 1, Intimidation 2, Streetwise 1

General Abilities: Athletics 8, Driving 6, Health 10, Infiltration 2, Mechanics 2, Medic 2, Scuffling 6, Stability 6

BRAIN

The brain is the person, often exaggeratedly geeky, equipped with the obscure background information needed to figure out what's trying to kill the group, and why. The brain's undoubted skill with computers may be augmented with a general expertise in improvisatory gadgetry. In social situations they may be betrayed by their compulsively awkward behavior, or simply see their legitimate concerns casually dismissed by their more worldly cast-mates.

Example: James LeGros, *The Last Winter*

Investigative Abilities: Architecture 1, Research 1, Bureaucracy 1, Negotiation 1, Computer Science 2, Photography 1, Science 1

General Abilities: Driving 4, Fleeing 8, Health 6, Hiding 4, Mechanics 4, Medic 4, Preparedness 8, Shrink 2, Stability 6

AUTHORITY FIGURE

This is the protective combat expert character, often older than the other characters, who teaches them to fight back against the creatures of darkness. The authority figure's fate in a horror movie is often to bite the dust at the end of the second act, to further intensify the jeopardy faced by the other characters. A character run by a cautious roleplayer may achieve a longer lifespan.

Example: Ving Rhames, *Dawn of the Dead*

Investigative Abilities: Law 1, Bullshit Detector 1, Cop Talk 1, Interrogation 1, Negotiation 1, Streetwise 1, Investigative Procedure 2

General Abilities: Athletics 4, Driving 2, Health 8, Infiltration 2, Mechanics 2, Preparedness 2, Scuffling 6, Sense Trouble 2, Shooting 6, Shrink 2, Stability 6

BURNOUT

This comic relief character is the quintessential slacker, their senses so blurred by pot smoke that they fail to see the enormity of their jeopardy until it's tragically too late. In an ongoing *Fear Itself* campaign, their cheery good nature and dulled perceptions may turn out to be a surprisingly effective survival mechanism.

Although he's not a horror character per se, the Platonic exemplar of this type remains Brad Pitt in *True Romance*.

Investigative Abilities: Architecture 1, Occult Studies 1, Trivia 1, Bullshit Detector 2, Impersonate 1, Reassurance 1, Streetwise 1

General Abilities: Driving 2, Filch 4, Fleeing 8, Health 6, Hiding 6, Infiltration 4, Mechanics 4, Sense Trouble 4, Shrink 2, Stability 6

GOOD GUY

Here we find the male everyman character, often young, frequently presented with a minimum of specific detail, so that audience members can project a sense of identification onto him. He protects others and retains a basic, common-sense morality, no matter how dire circumstances become.

Example: Cillian Murphy, *28 Days Later*

Investigative Abilities: Social Sciences 1, Bullshit Detector 1, Flattery 1, Negotiation 1, Impersonate 1, Reassurance 1, Computer Science 1, Photography 1

General Abilities: Athletics 4, Driving 2, Fleeing 4, Health 8, Infiltration 2, Mechanics 2, Medic 2, Preparedness 4, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 4, Shrink 2, Stability 8

PREACHER MAN

A genre where evil takes on solid form invites questions of religious faith. The priest or preacher is a standard

Playing With Gender

These defined gender roles and the punitive attitude to sexual activity are common horror tropes. Stereotypes are a great template for characters – but they’re just begging to be subverted. This is a roleplaying game, which means character concepts are only ever a starting point, and their fate is not predetermined.

As a player, you can subvert these from the beginning by choosing a gender identity or sexuality that does not match the stereotype. During the game, you can confound expectations by showing vulnerability as the Jock or Sexy Girl, stepping up to the plate to face the creature as the Burnout, or by getting it on later in the game as the Good Girl.

As a GM, you set the tone for the game, the morality of the setting. If the players are embracing horror tropes, follow their lead, but don’t impose stereotypical horror movie fates on the characters – let the dice fall where they may. And most importantly, if you’re offering pregenerated characters, never impose a role on a player; many women, for example, get plenty of stereotyping in daily life, without having “Sexy Girl” imposed on them.

figure in supernatural horror, especially the devil worship subgenre (*The Exorcist*, *Bless the Child*, *Exorcism of Emily Rose*). Religious figures trained in their culture’s exorcism techniques may be able to hold creatures of the Outer Dark at bay. Or maybe not...

Example: Harvey Keitel, *From Dusk Till Dawn*

Investigative Abilities: Humanities 1, Languages 1, Occult Studies 1, Social Sciences 1, Bullshit Detector 1, Bureaucracy 1, Interrogation 1, Reassurance 1

General Abilities: Driving 4, Fleeing 6, Health 7, Medic 4, Preparedness 6, Scuffling 2, Sense Trouble 2, Shrink 6, Stability 8

RUNNING ONE-SHOTS

Since you don’t need to worry about the sequel, one-shots can fly with a premise that wouldn’t be sustainable in a long-term game. Look for interesting premises for a

group of characters, and write the scenario to threaten them. For example:

- The PCs are all in a band, and they’re threatened by the ghost of the lead singer, who committed suicide just before they hit the big time.
- The PCs are the crew of a freighter at sea that runs into an uncharted island.
- The PCs are all members of the same family, estranged for years, but now reunited for the reading of their mother’s will.
- The PCs are all members of a live action roleplaying club, on their way to a game way out in the woods.

Open with a scene that lets all the player characters introduce themselves and demonstrate their place in the group – ideally, one that also lets the players act out the relationships and pecking order in the group. Give the players a chance to find out who their characters are before dropping them into the mystery. For example:

- o *Tonight’s gig was a disaster, and we join the band backstage as they recriminate and argue on the way to the afterparty.*
- o *The freighter’s running into a fog bank. Who’s on the bridge? Who’s on watch? What’s everyone else doing?*
- o *You’ve all arrived at the lawyer’s office. One by one, you take your places in the carpeted waiting room outside. Which of you arrives first? The rest of you will arrive one by one over the next few minutes...*
- o *You’re all in the car, driving to the event. It’s a road trip! Who’s driving? Who’s in charge of the music?*

SCENE BUDGET

For a one-shot, you can generally fit 3–5 major dramatic or action scenes into a single session. Purely investigative scenes take much less time to play out, but you then need to give the players time to discuss and digest their new clues. (Try giving new information to some of the players, then switching to the other players and running a directed scene or flashback with them – time is especially precious in a one-shot.)

Fear Itself

With a limited budget of scenes, ensure that each player character has a moment to shine in at least one of them. Include a combat scene if one of the pregenerated characters is an ex-soldier; give that professor of Etruscan archaeology some Etruscan relics to examine.

TIME LIMITS

A one-shot needs to run in 3–4 hours, and the last 45–60 minutes should be given over to the final scene and the aftermath. To keep things on track, consider including one or more of the following in the adventure:

An explicit time limit: Like “They’re going to sacrifice the kidnapped baby at midnight” or “We have to get out of here before the portal closes.” You can even tie this to the actual time in the real world (“If you haven’t found a cure to the virus by ten o’clock by my watch, then it’s too late and the pandemic spreads out of Madagascar”).

Floating Core Clues (p. 58) are especially useful in a one-shot. Include a floating Core Clue that points to the finale, which you can drop in as needed to move the players toward that ultimate confrontation. Alternatively, have a backup Core Cue that could become available at any time (a code that has to be cracked, waiting on a police report), and give it to the players if they’re running out of time.

A forced move: This is a scene that makes it obvious what the players must do next, or compels them to act. It must be independent of their current situation, so it can swoop in and sweep them along to the finale. The example adventure uses a forced move on p. 120, when the player characters are possessed and forced to go to the isolated farmhouse.

STABILITY AND ONE-SHOTS

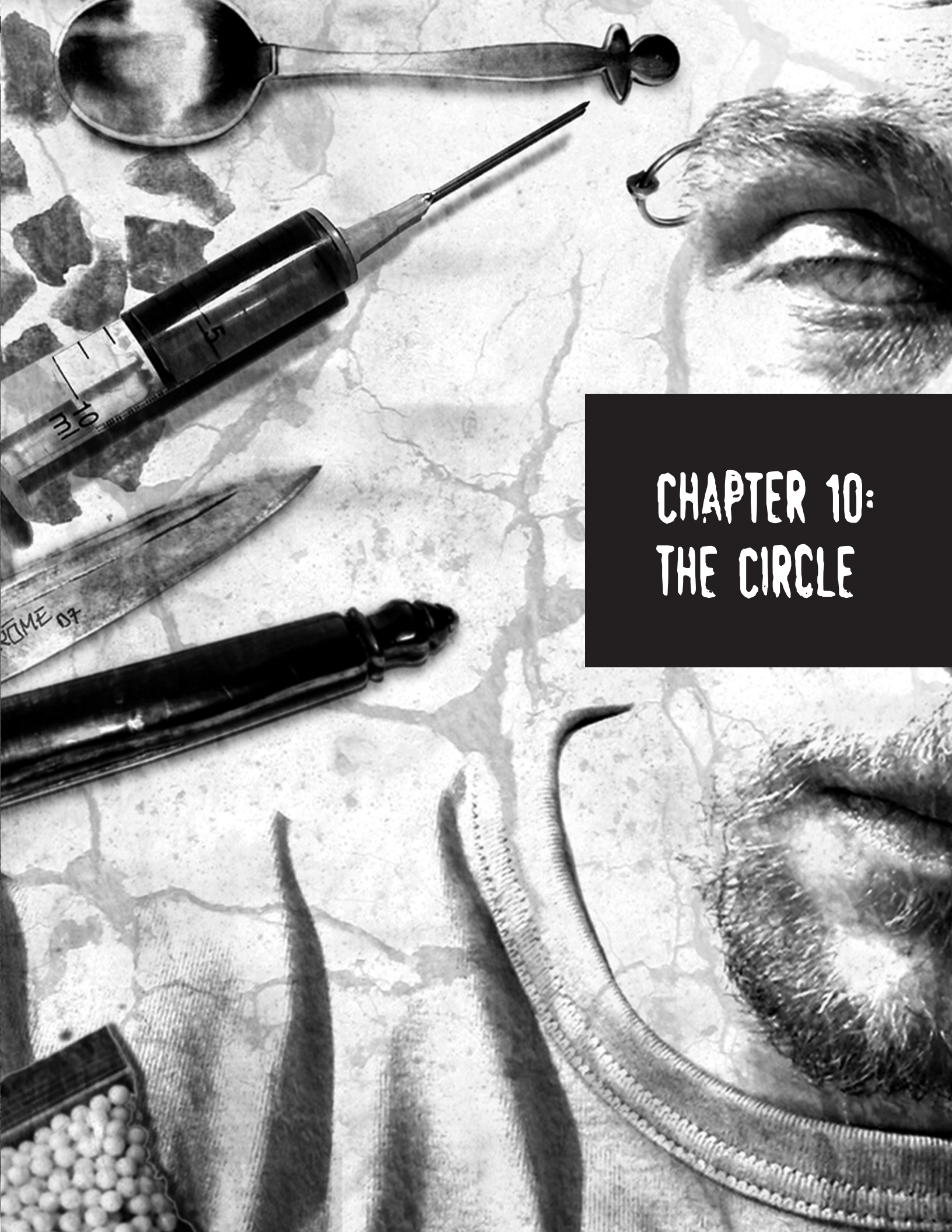
The default Stability rules give the players a comfortable safety margin. It’s harder to lose Stability than to lose Health, and the really bad effects of low Stability only kick in at –6 and lower (p. 48). If you want to emphasize the danger of madness and terror in your one-shot, consider changing the thresholds for Losing It and getting Shattered as follows:

Losing It: –1 to –3 Stability

Shattered: –4 to –6 Stability

Gone: –7 or less Stability

In some one-shots, insane or shell-shocked player characters are a distraction from the game. If you’ve only got three hours to solve a mystery, then it’s distracting and annoying to load extra problems onto already overwhelmed player characters. However, if the players enjoy roleplaying troubled and broken characters, or if you’re aiming at a tragic story where almost everyone goes mad and dies, then take away that comfortable safety margin and bring the threat of madness closer.



**CHAPTER 10:
THE CIRCLE**

Fear Itself

Eric Teller was dead. To begin with.

He shouldn't have been in the thaumazine trial. The new drug was designed to improve concentration and cognitive function, not treat the sort of psychological damage Teller had suffered at the hands of his abusive father, a secret worshipper of the Outer Dark. Eric fled his home and came to the big city; he joined the trial because he needed the money.

It wasn't enough — he killed himself while on the drug, but he didn't die. Not completely.

Teller discovered that his... His ghost? His consciousness? Whatever remained of him was still connected to the drug. He could attune to other thaumazine users and temporarily possess their bodies.

It's not enough — he wants to live again, and not in snatched moments in a borrowed body. He wants to possess a new body completely, but he can't do that while his soul is smeared across a dozen test subjects. He needs to winnow them down to a single host, ideally one overdosing on the drug.

He wants to possess one of the player characters.

THE SETUP

The player characters are all part of an experimental drug trial (**The Monthly Meeting**).

INVESTIGATIVE TRIGGER

One of the other participants in the drug trial, Austin Spetz, is murdered (**The Museum**), and leaves a cryptic message for the player characters after his death.

THE SPINE

The obvious (and correct) assumption is that the murder is connected to the drug trial, but the pharmaceutical company **Bluegold Research** (p. 114) denies that its cognitive-adjustment drug could have anything to do with the death. At **The Funeral** (p. 112), one of the player characters undergoes a bizarre fugue and seems to know the family of the deceased.

Digging Deeper (p. 115) into Bluegold reveals the existence of a previous trial, but can also incur the attention of **Men in Black** (p. 117). The player characters might also investigate **The Other Test Subjects** (p. 116), who also start dying mysteriously; have a chat with cops in **The Police Investigation** (p. 112); or find **The Mugger** (p. 113), another victim of Teller's, who was responsible for physically killing Spetz. Clues may lead the investigators to **Dr. Jones** (p. 116), a chemist who was involved in the original trial.

Drop in a **Fugue State** (p. 118) as needed for pacing.

The investigators arrive or wake up at **The Isolated Farmhouse** (p. 120), Teller's former home. Exploring, they **Meet the Parents** (p. 122) before experiencing **A Visitation** (p. 123) and **Running the Gauntlet** (p. 123).

THE TWIST

The villain is inside the player characters.

SCENES

THE MONTHLY MEETING

Scene Type: Introduction

Lead-Out: *The Museum*

The game begins with the player characters meeting, as they have done for the last several months, at a run-down meeting room rented by Bluegold for the afternoon. As in previous months, all the participants in the drug trial fill out a questionnaire, take a few basic health tests, and are then given another month's supply of the drug.

Hand out the pregenerated player characters. Any characters not in use don't play any part in the game (with the exception of Sarah Bulzmann, who becomes a character for the GM to play).

The pregenerated characters have each spent 8 Investigative build points and 50 General points, so they have at least 2 Investigative points and 10 General points left to spend. Each player should note down one Source of Stability on their character sheet.

BACKGROUND

There is another dimension, a realm of terror and suffering, called the Outer Dark. Worshipers of the Outer Dark have long sought ways to reach that realm, to make contact with the entities that exist there, beyond the Membrane of sanity that protects our world. Eric Teller's father David was one such worshiper, and tried to turn his son into a medium, a psychopomp who could enter the Outer Dark. He failed, and Eric ran away.

Thaumazine is an experimental drug, designed to improve concentration and reduce anxiety. In Eric's case, the drug's effects, when combined with the psychological abuse from his father, increased his psychic potential. He killed himself rather than become what he glimpsed in his nightmares.

Bluegold Research is a shell company. The original pharmaceutical company that was researching thaumazine went bust after one of the participants in the original trial (Eric Teller) killed himself. The assets of the company were bought by a shady investment fund; the round of drug trials that the player characters

are involved in are of questionable legality, and are being run to learn more about the drug.

Of the six pregenerated player characters, one (**Sarah Bulzmann**) works as a contractor for Bluegold, but she knows almost nothing about the company.

SETTING

Here and now. You can put it in your home town or some other city that's familiar to you, or in a nebulous "big city."

DISTANT HORRORS

Bluegold Research's investors are left deliberately shadowy and sinister. There are hints that Bluegold knew about the drug's strange powers, and that they are part of the same occult tradition as Eric Teller's abusive father. If the players want to continue delving into the mystery and turn this one-shot into a miniseries or campaign, then Bluegold Research's investors are a likely avenue of investigation at the very least.

All the characters have attended the meeting several times before, and have become at the very least nodding acquaintances with each other. Ask each player to describe briefly what their character looks like, and to describe one incident or trait that gave away a little of their personality to the other test participants. Then ask if any of the characters have become closer friends since joining the group.

Sarah Bulzmann can carry out medical tests on the group using **Science** while they fill out their questionnaires. Everyone's relatively healthy and shows no ill effects from the ongoing thaumazine treatment.

- Optionally, offer Sarah's player the opportunity to spend 1 point of **Science**. If she does, then she notices that one of the other characters (her choice) has slightly elevated blood pressure. That character has also made a mistake in filling out the questionnaire — he or she has answered the next question in each line in every answer box. (**GM Note:** The chosen player character is feeling the side effects of thaumazine; target that character first with a *Fugue State*, p. 118)

- Bulzmann has a packet of 28 thaumazine tablets for each player character. All the thaumazine packets are bar-coded, so Bluegold Research can tell who got genuine tablets and who got the double-blind sugar pills.
- According to the regular protocol, each character is to take one pill per day.

THE MISSING SUBJECT

One of the regular participants in the group is absent. He's **Austin Spetz**, the aging curator of a small private natural history museum in town. Spetz has attended every other meeting, and has been taking thaumazine longer than anyone else — he claimed that the drug gave him a new lease of energy and concentration.

Sarah Bulzmann has Spetz's contact number (along with the phone numbers of everyone else, too); if any of the other players suggest that their characters might be friendly with Spetz, they can have the number too. There's no answer.

Fear Itself

WHAT DOES THE DRUG DO?

Thaumazine's intended to be a "smart drug," improving concentration and clarity. So far, its effects are barely discernible. Teller's ability to return from the dead is partially a result of his use of thaumazine, but could equally be due to his father's abuse and worship of the Outer Dark – the GM can choose how much of an impact the drug has in her game.

The best thing to do is leave the nature of the drug a mystery to be solved over the course of the game. There are three likely answers to the above question:

- **Nothing.** The drug doesn't work. Teller's just targeting users of the drug because he's an insane undead monster. Spetz is able to possess someone at his funeral because of the unique nature of his death.
- **Concentration Enhancer:** The drug does make you a little smarter and calmer. Taking a pill costs 1 Health, but lets you refresh 1 point in any Investigative Ability pool you possess, or regain 1 point of Stability.
- **It Gives Psychic Powers:** Take enough of the drug, and it unlocks latent psychic abilities. If you go with this option, then a player character

who takes an overdose of thaumazine gets a temporary psychic power. When a character takes an overdose (10 or more pills), roll a d6. On a 6, the character gains a psychic power of the GM's choice, and starts with 3 points in that pool. On a 1-5, the character loses that amount of Health. (Or, if the character is the last survivor or it's dramatically appropriate, then the character automatically gets the psychic powers, but still has to roll for Health loss.)

DOUBLE BLIND TESTING

Half of the test subjects get genuine thaumazine; half get fake pills that don't have any effect. The player characters don't know if they got treated with the real drug, or if they got dummy pills and they're benefiting from the placebo effect – or if the entire group got real pills, and some other group got dummies.

You don't need to determine which of the player characters got the real drug yet. If they get to *The Isolated Farmhouse* (p. 120) on their own, then half of the characters got the real drug and half got placebos. Only those who took the genuine drug are vulnerable to possession by Teller. However, if you had to use a *Fugue State* (p. 118) to get them to the farmhouse, then they all got the genuine article and they're all vulnerable.

While the characters call Spetz, a sudden and undeniable chill fills the room. All the characters suddenly feel cold; invisible icy fingers run down their spines, tugging at every vertebra. There's a momentary sense that Spetz is present in the room, as though his empty seat is suddenly filled. And then, just as abruptly as it appeared, the feeling fades. Everyone gets to make a 2-point **Stability** test.

If the characters decide to investigate Spetz's absence immediately, run *The Museum*.

THE DREAM

If the players don't follow the trigger and investigate Spetz's absence, then pick one of the player characters (ideally, the one diagnosed with elevated blood pressure by Sarah Bulzmann). That character has a disturbing dream about being trapped in a wooden case with a glass door and getting eaten by a... skeletal bear! Through the blood-smeared glass, the character sees

two figures. One is a shadowy shape without a face; the other is a young man in a black hooded sweatshirt, who is holding the door of the case shut so the character can't break out, while the bear skull bends down to sink its yellowed fangs into the dreamer's flesh...

The character snaps awake. Spetz works in a natural history museum, just like the one in the dream. Something is terribly wrong there.

THE MUSEUM

Scene Type: Core

Core Clues: Spetz's message, the funeral

Lead-In: *The Monthly Meeting*

Lead-Outs: *The Other Test Subjects, Bluegold Research, The Funeral, The Mugger, The Police Investigation*

The Holmgarth Museum of Natural History includes the collection of an eccentric 19th-century industrialist and avid hunter, and not much else. It's a few dark rooms crammed with oak cases containing stuffed animals, bones, and pinned insects. The museum is funded by a family bequest, and gets only a handful of visitors every year, mostly bored students or tourists sheltering from the rain. Spetz loves it — he gets to potter around looking at old bones and reading old books.

Or rather, he loved it.

The player characters are the first people to visit the museum in some time. The front door has a closed sign in the window, but is unlocked (**Investigative Procedure**: and there's no sign of forced entry). Inside, the musty smell of the old cabinet wars with the metallic tang of spilled blood. It's eerily quiet; the old floorboards creak as the characters move through the exhibits. The stuffed birds, frozen in moments of flight or fight, stare at the intruders with glassy eyes.

Exploring, they soon find Spetz's corpse. The old man is *inside* one of the display cases. He's impaled on the yellow-white claws of a bear skeleton that was displayed in there. The floor of the case is awash in blood — he must have hung up there for some time before the PCs arrived! That's a 4-point Stability test!

- **Simple Search:** There's something written on the inside of the case in Spetz's blood. It looks like "1 / 3" — a one, followed by a slash, followed by a three. This is a reference to the information the PCs discover in *Digging Deeper* (p. 115), but right now it's a cryptic message.
- (core) **Notice:** There's a discarded thaumazine pack on the floor near the case. That might imply that one of *The Other Test Subjects* (p. 116) was involved.
- **Investigative Procedure:** There are clear fingerprints on the doorframe and the handle. These belong to *The Mugger* (p. 113); the characters either point these out to the police in *The Police Investigation* (p. 112), or take copies of the prints and have a cop friend run them with a 1-point **Cop Talk** spend.
- If the characters open the case, a torrent of blood that had pooled at the base of the door spills out, gushing over their shoes and soaking into the varnished wooden floor of the museum. Spetz's body slides off the bear's claws and tumbles forward — does anyone



catch it, or do they let the corpse of their friend flop unceremoniously onto the ground?

- o Spetz has a few chalky fragments of thaumazine in his beard, suggesting he gobbled several tablets shortly before his death.
- o His wallet is still in his pocket; his phone is in his jacket. This wasn't a robbery.
- o His eyes are extremely bloodshot.

When running this scene, emphasize the physicality of the corpse. It's a big, heavy, cold lump of meat and bone. It stains everything it touches. Make it as visceral and solid as you can; keep asking the players if they're touching the body when they try to investigate it.

Ask the players what they want to do next. Do they call the police? Contact Spetz's family? Give the players a few moments to discuss how they react to the death.

Fear Itself

AMATEUR TAXIDERMISTRY

There's a curious ornament in Spetz's office, on his desk. It's a stuffed and mounted pigeon. It's clearly the work of an amateur taxidermist, as the animal is horribly misshapen, with a puffy, distorted head that gives it an almost human leer. It's nailed to a chunk of wood. In contrast to the other exhibits, this was clearly made in the last year or so. Written underneath is "TO AUSTIN, FROM ERIC" — Spetz and Eric Teller became friends when they both participated in the first thaumazine trial.

Searching through Spetz's papers (**Research**) finds paperwork from Bluegold Research dating back several years — there was indeed an earlier round of thaumazine trials, and Spetz took part in them. The characters also find some letters from Spetz's doctor; he was suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, and it looks like he'd pinned his hopes on thaumazine being able to cure or at least delay the progress of his ailment.

There's also a packet of envelopes that's been ripped open.

THE POLICE INVESTIGATION

Scene Type: Alternate

Lead-Ins: *The Museum, Digging Deeper*

Lead-Outs: *Bluegold Research, Digging Deeper*

The police treat Spetz's death as suspicious, and investigate. Over the next few days, a detective from the local police force interviews any player characters who reported the discovery of the body; later, anyone who didn't go to the museum but is part of the thaumazine testing group also gets questioned. The investigating officer is Detective **Jean Elroy**.

If the players go straight to the police after finding Spetz's corpse, and haven't started their own investigations, then run this scene before *The Funeral* (p. 112). If the players are already investigating Spetz's death and the thaumazine trials, then mix in visits from Detective Elroy at inconvenient moments.

Hiding the Body

There's no strong reason for the players to conceal Spetz's death — they all have alibis for the time he died — but players sometimes make odd decisions, and panicking in the face of an unexpected death is a perfectly normal reaction. Spetz gets reported missing a day after the scenario begins by Mrs. Alvarez, the cleaner at the museum.

Unless the player characters tampered significantly with the body, then none of them are considered suspects. The police found fingerprints on the doorframe and handle of the display case that match a set on file belonging to a petty criminal and drug addict named **Terence Bolt** (he's *The Mugger*, p. 113). Detective Elroy's working theory is that Bolt crept into the museum hoping to rob the place, and was disturbed by Spetz. Bolt then panicked and attacked the old man, either killing him by mistake or triggering a heart attack. He then clumsily tried to hide the body in a display case.

- A 1-point **Cop Talk** spend convinces Elroy that she can trust the player characters, so she reveals the above information without mentioning Bolt's name. Still, that should be enough of a clue for Brian Curdy to think of checking out *The Mugger* (p. 113) who attacked him.
- Another 1-point spend of **Cop Talk** or **Reassurance** gets her to drop Bolt's name.
- **Bullshit Detector:** Elroy's just interested in clearing this case as quickly as possible. Bolt's a known criminal and his prints are at the scene, so he's clearly guilty. Bolt's own account of what happened (see *The Mugger*, p. 113) is so confused that it doesn't help his case.

She doesn't think this has any connection to the pharmaceutical trials, but she'll speak to Bluegold Research herself.

THE FUNERAL

Scene Type: Core

Core Clue: Spetz's friend Teller

Lead-In: *The Museum*

Lead-Outs: *Bluegold Research, Dr. Jones*

Spetz's funeral takes place several days after the events of *The Museum* (p. 110). The old man was unmarried and had no children; his closest relatives are his estranged

sister **Emilia Hockwood** and her family. The little old church reminds the player characters of Spetz's natural history museum, with the same smell of varnished wood, dust, and preservative chemicals. The old man has become another exhibit, although obviously it's a closed-coffin funeral, so there's no glass door this time.

Ask the players which of them wish to attend the funeral. Emilia Hockwood is polite but distant; she and her brother quarreled about money long ago, and hadn't spoken much in recent years. Still, she's shocked by his sudden death, and regrets leaving so much unsaid.

– (core) **Reassurance:** When a player character expresses sympathy for her loss, Emilia asks if "Mr. Teller" is here. She remembers that Spetz mentioned he'd befriended a young man named Teller. Is he here? (Obviously, the player characters have no idea yet who Teller is, so this question prompts their own investigation. Maybe this Teller is another thaumazine trial member.)

– **Streetwise:** One of the characters spots a big man wearing a black sweatshirt with a college logo, lurking at the back of the church. He leaves abruptly if approached and hurries away. This is *Dr. Jones* (p. 116), the supervisor of the first test group. If the player characters try pursuing, run it as a contest of Jones' Fleeing (6) vs. the Athletics of the chaser. Jones runs because he assumes the player characters are working for the *Men in Black* (p. 117).

The ceremony is brief; the pastor gives a short sermon about how an unexpected death reminds us that life is fleeting and precious, and we must light the world as best we can with the brief candle of our earthly existence.

Eliminating Elroy

Players may be tempted to rely on a professional like Detective Elroy instead of using their own initiative. Three ways to counter this:

- **Bullshit Detector** suggests that Elroy's got no interest in finding the truth. She just wants to pin the crime on Bolt and be done with the case.
- Have the *Men in Black* (p. 117) bribe her into dropping her investigation.
- Have one of the player characters kill her during a *Fugue State* (p. 118)

THE POSSESSION

Pick one of the player characters at the funeral. (If none of them attended, then pick one of them anyway — that character attends in a *Fugue State* — p. 118). The character is briefly possessed by the mind of the late Austin Spetz. Describe how the character's mouth is suddenly flooded with the chalky, bitter taste of the thaumazine pills. The character's vision goes blurry, as if their eyes can't focus properly without thick glasses. The character then stumbles out of their seat, walks up to Emilia Hockwood, and says "*Em... I'm sorry I said those things about you to father. I was so angry... please, you must forgive me.*" The character then blacks out.

- Such a weird experience is worth a 2-point Stability test to the unfortunate victim.
 - o Ask the player if they want to spend another point of Stability. If they agree, the character has the bizarre sensation of something *dissolving*, as Spetz's consciousness dissipates. The sense of loss is overwhelming as Spetz is gone forever.
- **Impersonate:** The character's accent and body language was weirdly similar to that of Austin Spetz.
- Emilia Hockwood is shocked and appalled by the character's behavior; **Reassurance** calms her down. She admits that the root of her antipathy with her brother stems from an incident many years ago when their father was dying. Austin lied about Emilia's relationship with a young man, and her father changed his will at the last moment to cut her out. No one else except Austin knew about that event. She furiously assumes that Austin blabbed about her family's most private dealings to strangers like the player characters!

– If you haven't run *The Police Investigation* yet, then Detective Elroy might be one of the attendees at the funeral, and could swoop in to question the investigators when they're off guard.

THE MUGGER

Scene Type: Alternate

Core Clue: Eric Teller's name

Lead-Ins: *The Museum*, *The Police Investigation*

Lead-Out: *Bluegold Research*

Fear Itself

One of the pregenerated player characters, **Brian Curdy**, had several thaumazine pills stolen when he was attacked by a mugger, **Terence Bolt**. (The incident is described on Curdy's character sheet.)

The player characters can find Bolt:

- A 1-point **Streetwise** spend lets the characters ask around dangerous areas of town until they spot Bolt.
- If they have Bolt's name, then a **Bureaucracy** spend could get his address out of official records.
- So could a 1-point **Negotiation** spend and a bribe.
- They could also wait until Detective Elroy arrests him, then use **Cop Talk** or **Filch** to get a copy of his interview transcript.

Bolt admits that he attacked Brian Curdy and stole drugs from him. Bolt didn't know what the drugs were, but he took them anyway, and had a bizarre hallucination where he dreamed he went to a museum with someone called Eric. In the dream, Eric got very angry with him, said that Bolt "wasn't the right one," and then turned into this "machine thing made of meat and spikes and saws," but there was a "zombie bear" there too. Next thing Bolt knows, he's waking up in the street, lying against a postbox, and his shoes were all covered in blood.

- If the player characters are present, then **Interrogation** (core) pushes Bolt into remembering the name "Teller." He doesn't know how he knows that — it's like he learned it in a dream.
- A 1-point **Interrogation** or **Reassurance** spend (or checking CCTV images with **Photography**) gets one last curious bit of information — Bolt posted a letter just before collapsing. (He sent this to his mother, but that only becomes clear at *The Isolated Farmhouse* — p. 120).

BLUEGOLD RESEARCH

Scene Type: Core

Core Clues: List of current test subjects, the existence of older files

Lead-Ins: *The Funeral, The Mugger, The Police Investigation, The Museum*

Lead-Outs: *The Other Test Subjects, Digging Deeper, Men in Black*

Bluegold Research is physically located in a swanky high-tech research park on the edge of town. There are big signs advertising office space for rent, and the massive car park is empty apart from a single car. The company is down to a single employee in this office, **Helen Deerborne**, and her only role is to keep sending out cash and supplies of thaumazine to the test groups that are still using the drug, and to collate the reports sent back by Sarah Bulzmann and the other test coordinators and send them off to the company's mysterious new owners. (Answering the phones, by the way, isn't her job — calls to the office go straight to voicemail.)

Deerborne is initially defensive, arguing that it's a breach of confidentiality for the characters to come to the office and talk to her. She threatens to kick them out of the drug trial and stop their payments if they don't leave immediately. Any suitable Interpersonal Ability can be used to compel her to talk (**Intimidation** and mentioning the death of another test subject; **Impersonate** and pretending to be police officers or drug enforcement; **Negotiation** and arguing that the quicker she answers their questions, the sooner the PCs will leave).

Helen reveals the following:

Bluegold Research is on the verge of being wound down. Another company has purchased the pharmaceutical research and files, and all the other employees have either been fired or moved on. She's been kept on only to finish the current round of thaumazine testing.

There are three active groups of thaumazine test subjects. She sends out samples from the company store, and gets back medical reports.

- She's not a chemist, but as far as she knows, thaumazine is harmless. **Bullshit Detector** (core) picks up that she's lying, or at least not wholly confident about what she's saying. There must be some evidence suggesting dangerous side effects, or something else sinister. They'll need to try *Digging Deeper* (p. 115), either by breaking into the office or convincing Helen Deerborne to cooperate fully.

- (core) **Bureaucracy:** She can provide a list of *The Other Test Subjects* (p. 116), including contact details.

o Research: The test groups are numbered 2, 3, and 4 (the player characters are group 3), and individual members are denoted by a second number. So, the PCs are listed as 3/1, 3/2, and so forth. Spetz scrawled 1/3 in his own blood. The records of the first test group — group 1 — are missing.

- **Science:** All the research notes on thaumazine are either sealed away or have been transferred to another office already. Deerborne says she only has a small supply of thaumazine left — this phase of testing is almost complete, so she has just enough to keep the three test groups supplied for another few weeks.
- **Investigative Procedure, Research, or Medicine:** Everything about this is weird. The company's mysterious new owners; the slipshod, under-the-counter testing protocol; the lack of clarity; their response to Spetz's death — something's very rotten in Bluegold Research.

DIGGING DEEPER

Scene Type: Core

Core Clue: Teller's address

Lead-In: *Bluegold Research*

Lead-Outs: *Fugue State, Men in Black, The Isolated Farmhouse, The Other Test Subjects, Dr. Jones, The Police Investigation*

The sealed records in Bluegold Research offices are the key to the mystery. How do the PCs get to them?

CONVINCING HELEN DEERBORNE

A 1-point spend in any suitable ability can crack Deerborne's resistance:

- **Law:** Threatening her with consequences for her possible culpability in Spetz's death
- **Interrogation:** Treating her as a criminal and making her so nervous that she volunteers to cooperate and show them the files
- **Impersonate:** Claiming to be a police officer with a warrant

- **Reassurance:** Promising they'll never tell anyone; they just want to reassure themselves that they're safe and thaumazine is harmless

Any of these abilities will get the PCs into the box of sealed files — but unless they make a 2-point spend from the same ability to convince her to keep quiet, then Deerborne will contact her employers and confess what she's done after the PCs leave. Run *Men in Black* shortly after this scene.

BREAKING IN

The Bluegold Offices aren't especially secure. Security guards patrol the whole industrial park at night, so the PCs must pass a Difficulty 6 Infiltration test to get *out* of the office without being spotted. (Let them get *in* automatically — remember the GUMSHOE philosophy of giving the players more information whenever possible. They've got to roll to get *out* safely.) If spotted, the PCs can escape with a Difficulty 4 Fleeing test; if that fails, they'll be detained (either segue into *The Police Investigation* (p. 112), have them released on bail with a **Law** spend, or get them out in a *Fugue State* (p. 118).

HACKING IN

Computer Science lets a tech-savvy PC hack into Bluegold's servers and recover the files from there. A 2-point spend is needed to cover the character's tracks; otherwise, run *Men in Black* (p. 117) in response, as Bluegold hires a cybersecurity team to trace the intruders.

THE SEALED RECORDS

The sealed records describe Bluegold Research's first round of thaumazine trials. The documents are weirdly organized and there are many missing files. It looks like someone tried to burn (or erase, in the case of electronic records) many of the files, and what's in the box in the office (or online) was pieced together from the surviving records.

Bluegold Research's first external test group for thaumazine had six volunteers. Austin Spetz was volunteer #5; volunteer #3 was a young man named Eric Teller.

- **Medicine or Research:** In Teller's application form, he claims to be fully healthy. However, an attached physical assessment shows

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that Teller had numerous old injuries and scars, consistent with physical abuse.

- **Social Sciences** or **Shrink**: A psychological assessment of Teller recommends that he not be included in the trial — the psychologist calls him dangerously volatile and speculates he may have psychopathic tendencies, but the assessment is overruled and Teller's allowed in.
- Then there's a gap in the records. It's clear that something went wrong with the trial. Financial records from about this time show that Bluegold Research is in trouble, and that one of its investors is angling to purchase the company outright and asset-strip it.
- There's a video interview of Teller. In it, the investigators see a pale, cold-eyed young man facing the camera. An offscreen interrogator asks Teller why he assaulted "Michael." Teller denies doing so — he claims he just "asked forcefully" for more thaumazine. When asked why, Teller mutters that he "needs it to get out to the Dark."
- The trial — and the local Bluegold office — was shut down shortly afterward. The new set of trials seems to be an attempt to make thaumazine look like less of a dead end to prospective buyers.
- (core) **Research**: The records include home addresses for *The Other Test Subjects* (p. 116), *Dr. Jones* (p. 116), and Teller himself — *The Isolated Farmhouse* (p. 120).
- Weirdly, at the bottom of the box of files is a crudely stuffed pigeon, similar to the one found in Spetz's office. (If the PCs are looking at this material online, then it's a photograph of a stuffed pigeon, left in the same computer folder as the other files. The photograph's filename hasn't been changed since it was pulled off the digital camera, so it's just a string of digits followed by .jpg.)

THE OTHER TEST SUBJECTS

Scene Type: Alternate/core

Core Clue: Strange behavior, Dr. Michael Jones' name

Lead-Ins: *Digging Deeper*, *Bluegold Research*

Lead-Out: *Dr. Jones*

The player characters aren't the only test subjects on the second set of thaumazine trials. There are two other test groups, each with its own supervisor and its own set of volunteers. Bluegold Research has contact details for the various groups.

Run this scene as a montage — instead of playing through every interview with the other test subjects, describe most of the interactions briefly. Describe frightened or confused faces, doors closing, heads shaking.

A few interviews do turn up useful information — give extra details with the use of a suitable Investigative Ability.

- Rosara Applebaum hasn't been feeling right lately. She blames the thaumazine, and has stopped taking it. **Reassurance** learns that she's been having blackouts.
- Martin Moro is in intensive care in a hospital, along with his wife. A car crash. **Cop Talk** with an officer discovers that Moro suddenly swerved off the road and drove full speed into a wall.
- Ardis Kossman doesn't want to talk to the PCs, and closes the door. **Notice** spots a wall covered in drawings of a shadowy figure.
- Delana Stark is shaky and sick. She says that she met a man in her local dry cleaners who warned her against taking thaumazine. He said he used to work for the company that made it, and that they weren't to be trusted. **Negotiation** or **Reassurance** (core) gets his name — it's Doctor Jones.

DR. JONES

Scene Type: Alternate/core

Core Clue: Teller's address

Lead-Ins: *Digging Deeper*, *The Other Test Subjects*

Lead-Outs: *The Isolated Farmhouse*, *Fugue State*, *Men in Black*

Michael Jones was the supervisor of the first test group. He was an employee of Bluegold Research, not an external contractor like Sarah Bulzmann. He was fired after the first test collapsed and took Bluegold with it.

Now, Michael lives in a run-down apartment,

crammed with textbooks and other belongings — it's obvious that he recently moved from somewhere much bigger to this cramped little one-room place.

Jones tells the characters the following:

- Eric Teller was one of the original test subjects for thaumazine. He was a troubled young man, the product of an abusive home life. There were rumors that he'd been tortured by his parents. Jones recommended that Teller be removed from the trial, but Bluegold ignored his concerns.
- Teller hated Jones, and the feeling was mutual. Something about the young man just put Jones on edge, right from the start.
- Despite Jones' initial fears, Teller seemed to respond to the treatment. He became more gregarious, and befriended two of the other test subjects — Austin Spetz, and a woman named Cari Hannigan.
- Hannigan died in a car crash.

o **Bullshit Detector:** Jones is holding back about the car crash. If pressed, he admits that he's always suspected that Teller had something to do with the accident, although there's no proof of this. But Jones heard Teller describing the car crash in alarmingly graphic detail, as if he'd been there to witness it.

- At the next monthly check-in, Teller demanded that Jones give him Hannigan's packet of thaumazine as well as his own allocation. When Jones refused, Teller became violent. Not just violent... he was... Jones shudders at this point.

o Using **Interrogation** or **Reassurance** prompts him to continue. He admits that in that moment, Teller seemed to become a terrifying *thing*, covered in spikes. It was a stress-induced hallucination — Jones is a scientist, he *knows* that it wasn't real — but it haunts him.

- Teller committed suicide a few weeks later. He somehow obtained more thaumazine — maybe from one of the other test subjects — and slit his wrists after overdosing on the drug. Jones doesn't know if the thaumazine was a contributory factor, but the scandal was enough to halt the trials and bring down Bluegold.

- Teller's parents collected the body after it was cremated. He thinks they were farmers.

- Bluegold, Jones admits, was a weird company to work for. He never met anyone from upper management, and there was very little internal communication. They fired Jones after Teller's death, and he's sure they've sabotaged his career since then. There were powerful people behind Bluegold. Lately, he's seen cars following him; his phone calls and emails get intercepted. He's been blacklisted from other research jobs; he's working in a dry cleaner's now.

- He's done some independent research into thaumazine. He's determined that the drug lingers in the brain for about a week; if you stop taking the pills, you should be fine. Adrenaline and stress burn it out of your system quicker.

- (**Core Clue**) He's got Teller's address. He took it from Bluegold's records on the day they fired him. He's thought about going there over and over, but never had the courage.

LIVING WEAPON

Optionally, especially if you're not ready to move on to *The Isolated Farmhouse* yet, have one of the investigators experience a *Fugue State* (p. 118). Teller possesses that character's body and attacks Jones by smashing a glass beaker and trying to drive Jones' face into the fragments. The victim of the possession is unaware of what's going on, but it's a 2-point Stability test for any other witnesses.

MEN IN BLACK

Scene Type: Antagonist Reaction

Lead-In: Any

Lead-Outs: *Digging Deeper*, *Dr. Jones*

The sinister forces behind Bluegold Research intend to protect their investment. If the player characters open the wrong door in their investigation, then those investors send agents to intimidate and dissuade them.

Foreshadow this encounter by giving the player characters a chance to spot a black sedan with two figures inside it at various other scenes

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(at the funeral, when exiting the police station, or after a group meeting). Inside the car are two men. Both are alarmingly pale, with skin that looks like the rind of fat on an uncooked steak, and weirdly discolored teeth. They speak in a disjointed, staccato rhythm that's off-putting.

One's tall, very thin, and very sharp; his partner is shorter, doughy, and moon-faced. Meet Mr. Needle and Mr. Pill.

They won't openly declare they're working for Bluegold, but it's obvious (**Bullshit Detector** or **Streetwise**) that they're somehow associated with the company.

- A 1-point **Notice**, **Streetwise**, **Occult Studies**, or **Trivia** spend spots that both men have odd scars or tattoos on their wrists. The marks are almost completely hidden by their shirts, but they look like some sort of religious symbols. (The same symbols show up again at the Teller farm.)

To intimidate the player characters, they might:

- Contact Sarah Bulzmann and order her to dissuade the group from investigating any further. Suggest that Bulzmann will end up like Michael Jones if they keep digging. (**Science** or **Research** then brings the investigators to *Dr. Jones*, p. 116).
- Meet one of the player characters alone and issue a warning to stop digging. For example, while Allie O'Brien crosses the street, a dark car speeds around a corner and nearly runs her over (**Sense Trouble** or **Athletics**, Difficulty 4, to avoid taking 1d6 damage). The window rolls down, and Mr. Pill hisses "stay away from Bluegold," before driving off at high speed.
- Threaten or assault one of the player characters' loved ones. Pick one of the Sources of Stability described by the players, and have them attacked by two men. All the victim knows is that they said to stay away from Bluegold. (For an added twist of the knife, have Pill and Needle force the victim to take a strong dose of thaumazine, opening the way for Teller to add to the victim's misery in a *Fugue State* — p. 118.)
- Summon a **Torture Dog** (p. 86) to attack the assembled player characters when they gather to discuss their next move. To call the Creature of Unremitting Horror, Pill and Needle

need to plant a fetish nearby. This fetish is a small sack containing crushed pills and broken syringes, mashed into crumpled photographs of the player characters (**Photography**: taken from their original application for the thaumazine test program), wrapped around the corpse of a strangled-at-birth puppy. Asking around with **Streetwise** or **Interrogation** gets an eyewitness account of two men dropping the sack out of a slow-moving car.

FUGUE STATE

Scene Type: Hazard/Antagonist Reaction

Lead-In: Any

Lead-Out: *The Isolated Farmhouse*

Intersperse *Fugue State* scenes as needed throughout the game.

Eric Teller's shade can possess anyone who's got thaumazine in their system. At first, his ability to possess people is limited — he can only step in for a moment or two. Later, as the number of potential hosts diminishes (either because the thaumazine wears off, or the host dies), he can focus more of his attention on each victim, and so takes control for longer. Once he gets down to one potential host, he'll be able to permanently possess that unlucky individual.

Teller provides temporary **Athletics**, **Scuffling**, and **Weapons** pools of 6 points each to his host; the possession ends when any of those pools is depleted, or when the GM thinks the scene has been milked for all its horrific potential. The player may choose to spend from the character's regular pools, too.

An early *Fugue State* is a brief blackout where the victim acts oddly for an instant. Later on, they last long enough for Teller to either attempt to kill the victim, or use the victim as a murder weapon. If Teller's inside a body when it dies, he'll also be destroyed. Therefore, his suicide attempts will always involve a delay — he won't throw his possessed victim out a window, as he can't be sure of escaping from the host body before it hits the ground. He could, though, force the victim to ingest poison that will take a few minutes to work, as that gives him time to disentangle his spirit.

Here's what a *Fugue State* feels like from the inside: the world seems to contract, growing dark around the

Picking the Right Reaction

In a one-shot game, you won't have time to use more than one or two of these potential reactions. We've included four, in rough order of threatening intensity, to give you a choice of options; pick the one that best suits the needs of your game. If you're using it early in the game, go for one of the first two. If you're raising the tension in the middle of the game, use one of the latter two.

Learning to read the table is a key skill for a GM. If your players are engaged and interested in the chase, then go for a more low-key, subtle antagonist reaction, luring the players onward. On the other hand, if your players are distracted or unfocused, a scene that forces them to react (to comfort a traumatized loved one, or to run away from a monstrous alien dog-thing) will bring their attention back to the game.

edges, like the start of a migraine. You hear the sound of something heavy and metal being dragged across rough stone, and smell battery acid. There's a brief window at this point where you can make a Difficulty 5 Stability test to resist possession; if you fail, then Teller has you.

Here's what it looks like from the outside: the victim's eyes droop for a moment. If you've already experienced your own *Fugue State*, then you glimpse a shadowy shape hovering around the victim for an instant. If the victim attacks, then you get the brief impression of a shape of spikes and claws superimposed on the victim's body.

DIRECTED SCENES

Scenes where the player character is alone are best run as directed scenes focusing on the aftermath. The character blacks out and wakes up somewhere unfamiliar, or discovers that their actions during the blackout were strange or abhorrent. Some samples, in increasing order of horror:

- *You find yourself in the college library. Your mouth is dry and chalky – it's full of half-chewed thaumazine tablets. Looking down, your hands are stained in black ink, and the table's covered in hundreds of pages of incomprehensible scribbling. Drawings of birds, and horrible curses and threats... what were you writing? Then you realize that everyone in the room is staring at you – were you talking out loud?*

- *You black out for a second, and when you come to, you're with your mother. She's crying and furious at the same time, cradling her injured hand. Blood drips from it. "How could you do that?" she screams at you. "What were you thinking?" There's a knife in your hand. What do you do?*
- *You find yourself at your sister's house, taking off your coat. Your sister comes downstairs. "Hey, you weren't long. Did you and Tommy have fun at the park?" Tommy's her son, your nephew. She pauses. "Where's Tommy?" You have no memory of taking him to the park – the last thing you recall is putting him into your car. What do you do?*

If Teller tries to force a player character into committing suicide, make it a hazard scene – the player can escape the danger with a successful roll.

- *Everything goes dark. Then, like you're waking up, you're aware of yourself again. It's all still dark, other than a single light in the distance. The light's coming closer, and there's this roaring thunder noise that grows and grows all around you. What do you do? (The player character is standing on train tracks in a tunnel, and the light is an approaching train.)*
- *You wake up. You're naked, and lying in the bathtub. It's freezing cold. Your arms won't move, and when you look down, you see they're covered in an ocean of blood. You've slit your wrists, and blood's pumping from the wounds and gushing down the plughole. You're not sure if you have the strength to move. What do you do? (Drop the character to 0 Health; **Medic** can save their life if applied in time. Remember that if you use Medic on yourself, you only get back half as much Health as normal.)*
- *You find yourself lying in bed. You're handcuffed to the bed frame. There's a weird smell of gasoline. Christ, all your books are piled on the far side of the room, and they're on fire! The fire's spreading, and you're handcuffed to the bed. What do you do? (**Athletics** to drag the whole bed away from the fire; **Filch** to slip the cheap handcuffs.)*

HAZARD SCENES

If Teller possesses a player character when they're with another PC, then take the possessed victim aside and explain, "For the next few minutes, you've been possessed by an evil spirit that wants to kill you and the other players characters." Let the player decide

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what Teller does with his new host body. (Players are often willing to do far more horrific things to their characters than any GM would dare.)

THE GATHERING

If it's time to move the adventure into its endgame (you've got about an hour left in the game session), then Teller uses a *Fugue State* to bring the surviving player characters to his old family farmhouse, the place where his father tortured him as a boy. He knows it's a deathtrap — but he's already dead, so he has nothing to fear on that score.

If you've got four or more players, then the easiest way to handle this transition is to have all the characters black out and wake up at *The Isolated Farmhouse*. If you've only got two or three players, try having Teller possess one of them and asking that player to lure the other two to the farmhouse. (“Guys, I found Teller’s old address. Let’s check it out...”)

THE ISOLATED FARMHOUSE

Scene Type: Core

Core Clue: Teller’s history

Lead-Ins: *Fugue State*, *Digging Deeper*, *Dr. Jones*

Lead-Outs: *Meet the Parents*, *A Visitation*

Teller grew up on a small, isolated, now decaying farm miles from anywhere. A long and winding dirt track leads from the main road to the Teller compound. Phones are unreliable here; the nearest houses are all abandoned (or unoccupied vacation homes). Rusting farm equipment, decades out of date, litters the Teller yard; his father dealt in agricultural junk. Wild birds roost in the outbuildings; everything is streaked with white marks.

If the player characters find the farm on their own initiative, they drive down the track and park outside the house. There’s someone upstairs (Teller’s mother — see *Meet the Parents*, p. 122) who watches them through the windows but doesn’t come downstairs.

Somewhere nearby, big dogs start barking and scraping as soon as the PCs arrive (or wake up, if they’re captives), but the dogs are in a cage and can’t (yet) get to the fresh meat.

CAPTIVES

If the characters were brought here by Teller, they awake locked in one of the barns. Teller’s removed any useful items (keys, wallets, weapons, phones, and any thaumazine tablets) and hidden them. He’s also removed the characters’ shoes and thrown a ring of broken glass around them to slow them down.

There’s a tray of food and water left out for the prisoners. The food is instant mashed potatoes, mixed with crushed thaumazine tablets.

Soon, he sends his mother (*Meet the Parents*) down to examine his prisoners and see which of them is the most suitable body for her son. If the PCs escape the barn before she arrives, they can look around. It’s clear that there’s no easy escape route from the farm; they can try making a break across the fields, or going back down the dirt track in the hopes of flagging down passing traffic on the road, but there’s no obvious way out.

(If they do try running, skip straight to *A Visitation*, p. 123.)

Exploring the farm, outbuildings, and ground floor of the house turns up several clues.

THE FARM

– **Notice** (or **Sense Trouble**, Difficulty 6) if someone goes running: There are man traps scattered around the farm. Old, mostly rusted, and probably non-functional. Blunder into one, and that’s +1 damage, and your leg is caught, requiring a 4-point **Mechanics** spend to free you; lose 1 extra Health for every missing point of Mechanics (so, if you only

Railroads Take You to Interesting Places

Declaring “*You all black out, and wake up somewhere different*” takes choice and freedom of action away from the players, but the game benefits from it. Bringing the group to the farmhouse ensures that, even if the players are slow to solve the first half of the mystery, they still get to participate in the finale (albeit at a disadvantage). It brings the players to a point where they can make interesting decisions — their fate, however, is still in their hands. They still need to come up with a way to stop Teller.

have 2 **Mechanic** points available, it'll cost you 2 more **Health** to pull your punctured calf muscles out of the jaws of the trap). You can't move afterward without some **Medic** treatment.

- Searching around, the investigators find a recently dug shallow grave in the yard. If they open it, they find a corpse wrapped in a bloody bed sheet. It's the body of an old man; he bears a clear family resemblance to Eric Teller. He's been stabbed multiple times.

THE OUTBUILDINGS

The Big Barn: One barn seems older and, well, more significant than the rest.

- **Occult Studies** or **Humanities:** That big barn over there has oddly ornate doors. They've been carved, and remind you more of, well, a rough church than a farm outbuilding. The ornamentation is mostly rotten or faded, but you can make out these leering, horrible faces — like gargoyles. Also, the doors were once painted. It's mostly gone, but you find a few flakes of blue and gold. Blue and gold.

Inside, the resemblance to a church is even more marked. There's a crude altar, made of an old workbench covered with a filthy, greasy cloth. On the altar is another badly made stuffed bird, just like the ones found in Spetz's office (p. 110) and Bluegold's sealed files (p. 115).

Instead of pews, the rest of the barn is full of what must be obscure farm equipment of various kinds. They're all old and covered in cobwebs and dust; they all have sharp spikes, or teeth, or drills. Post-holers, maybe. Some sort of drill for seeds? Woodworking equipment?

- **Mechanic:** No, these are straight-up torture and murder machines.

The Garage: There's an old but still roadworthy pickup truck here. There's a knack to starting it — you've got to hammer on the dashboard while turning the key. Getting it started requires a **Difficulty 6 Mechanics** or **Driving** test.

The Dog Run: Around the back of the house is an eight-foot-tall chain-link fence that keeps a trio of huge wolfhounds penned up. The poor beasts are mangy and starved; they've clearly been mistreated. They bark and scrape frantically at any strangers. Their cage is barred but isn't locked. If freed, they'll attack anyone other



Fear Itself

than Eric's mother or Eric's current possessed victim (although a **Outdoor Survival** or **Reassurance** spend might allow a PC to calm one of the beasts).

DOGS

Abilities: Athletics 4, Health 6, Scuffling 5

Hit Threshold: 3

Alertness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: -1

Damage Modifier: bite +0

THE GROUND FLOOR

The front door of the house is unlocked. Inside, it's as foreboding as the yard. Books and papers are piled everywhere, along with garbage. Rats and roaches scurry through the rooms, no longer afraid of the dozens of stuffed animals that decorate the house.

The electricity doesn't work. A pile of letters, mostly unpaid bills, rustles underfoot.

- **Notice:** One of the envelopes has bloody fingerprints on it. It's been opened. Inside are a few crumbs of thaumazine. This must be the envelope stolen from Spetz's museum and posted by Bolt.

- One stack of letters is from Bluegold Research, all addressed to David Teller — presumably Eric's father. The first is dated more than a year ago; it's from Dr. Jones (p. 116), expressing worries about Eric's stability. The second discusses Eric's suicide. The third one is strange — it's ostensibly a compensation check to Eric's parents, absolving Bluegold of any liability in their son's suicide, but the tone of the letter is oddly casual and familiar, as though the letter writer knew the recipient personally.

- **Languages:** Poking around, you find what resembles a diary. Or maybe more of a lab journal — it seems to describe experiments or treatments. It's vague on what those treatments are (entries like "five hours machine #3, unresponsive" are frustratingly cryptic), but echoes the notes kept by Sarah Bulzmann and the other thaumazine test supervisors.

It's clearly not a thaumazine trial, but there are disturbing similarities.

If you have time, the investigators can *Meet the Parents* by going upstairs. Otherwise, run *A Visitation*.

MEET THE PARENTS

Scene Type: Alternate/Hazard

Lead-In: *The Isolated Farmhouse*

Lead-Out: *A Visitation*

Eric Teller's insane mother crouches upstairs in the bedroom. She's been up here for days, ever since she murdered her husband. Her hands are still smeared with a mix of dirt and blood. She mutters to herself, whispering that her son has come home, and he's brought friends. When she sees the investigators, she jumps up and starts pawing at them, poking and examining them like they're livestock. "*Oh, you're nice and strong. And you! I always wanted a daughter. I just had one son, no daughters. You — no, you're not right at all. We'll have to cull you, won't we? We'll find the right one for my darling boy.*"

On a saucer on the nightstand, next to a wickedly sharp kitchen knife, is a thaumazine tablet.

Through her ramblings, she might give away any of the following:

- o *Eric's come home! He was gone for so long, and she was so worried. But now he's come back.*
- o *The drug opens the door. David was wrong — there's another key to the Outer Dark, and Eric found it.*
- o *David's friends are rich and powerful. They'll come for Eric.*
- o *Eric needs a new body. She's not right. Too old, and anyway, it wouldn't be proper, would it? A boy should find his own way in the world — he can't go back inside his mother.*

If the characters threaten her (**Intimidation** or **Interrogation**), she collapses and shrieks that she killed David. She did it with Eric, for Eric. He was always so cruel to the boy. She tries to crawl to the closet, where she keeps a loaded hunting rifle, with the intention of committing suicide. Before she gets there, though, run *A Visitation*.

ERIC'S MOTHER

Abilities: Athletics 2, Health 6, Scuffling 4, Shooting 6

Hit Threshold: 3

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +2

Damage Modifiers: scratch and bite -2, rifle +1

A VISITATION

Scene Type: Core

Core Clue: Teller's plan

Lead-Ins: *The Isolated Farmhouse, Meet the Parents*

Lead-Out: *Running the Gauntlet*

This scene can happen anywhere at the farm — when the characters are confronting Eric's mother works very well, but it doesn't have to be inside the house.

The room suddenly turns chill, and the papers rustle. All the stuffed animals in the house quiver, their heads swiveling to look at the player characters (if the investigators are outside, the stuffed animals suddenly gather at the windows, staring out at them).

A shadowy figure materializes. It's Eric Teller's ghost. It looks as though he's underwater, the way he drifts and swims through the air. He silently mouths a single word at the investigators: *CHOOSE*.

He wants them to nominate which of them will become his new body.

If one of the PCs is willing to make the sacrifice, and if the offered body is relatively safe and healthy, then Teller might be willing to accept that offering and let the rest of the PCs go (and if that feels like a good ending to you, you can skip *Running the Gauntlet* and jump straight to *Epilogue*). More likely, the players will refuse. If they do, Teller grins horribly, and melts away into a cloud of black smoke that heads toward the biggest, toughest player character (likely Greg Norris).

Teller then tries to possess that player character. He can only possess people who've recently taken

Eric Teller

Abilities: Aberrance 12

Hit Threshold: 4

Alertness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: +2

Damage Modifier: telekinetically hurled knife or broken glass +1

Possess Victim: By spending a point of Aberrance, Eric can attempt to possess anyone with thaumazine in their bloodstream. The victim gets to make a Difficulty 5 Stability test to resist possession. The possession only lasts for a few moments (in combat, one or two rounds at most, or until the victim takes damage).

If there's only one remaining target for possession, then Eric can permanently possess that victim.

Telekinesis: Eric can spend Aberrance as Scuffling.

Refreshing Aberrance: If Eric needs to, he can suck life force from his mother, refreshing his Aberrance score. Otherwise, it refreshes every 24 hours or so.

thaumazine (which is why he sent pills to his mother). Again, they can make Difficulty 5 Stability tests to resist possession.

If Teller possesses any of the player characters, he attempts to kill them through suicide, or use them to kill an unpossessed victim. Any suicide method he chooses must give him time to leave the victim — so, taking an overdose of pills or driving a car into a lake to drown would work, but not shooting his victim in the head or driving a car into a wall. Potential murder methods are described in *Running the Gauntlet*. Once he's down to a single potential host, he can stuff his spirit inside that last victim and inhabit them permanently.

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

Scene Type: Finale

Lead-In: *A Visitation*

Lead-Out: *Epilogue*

Fear Itself

This is a running chase scene through the farm and its surroundings. Teller's ghost hunts the player characters, attempting to possess one or more of them and use them to kill the rest. At the same time, his mother snipes at the PCs with her rifle, either taking potshots from her bedroom window, or coming downstairs to flush them out in person.

POTENTIAL WAYS TO HURT

Remember, Eric doesn't want to die while possessing a victim, so he'll choose attacks that knock his victims down to Seriously Hurt, rather than kill them outright.

- Jumping from an upstairs window is +1 damage.
- Cutting arteries with broken glass means the victim loses 1 Health in the first round, 2 in the second, 3 in the third, and 4 every round thereafter.
- All those torture machines in the barn do +2 damage.
- Other farm machinery with its spikes and impaling teeth does +1 damage.
- The kitchen knife is +1 damage; Ma's rifle is also +1 damage.
- Running into a bear trap is +1 damage; jumping into one face-first is +2 damage.
- Forcing a victim to jump into the dog run.
- Starting the old truck in the garage and using it to run down a victim or two.

Eric gets one good swing at a victim before he has to leave the body. So, he might throw the first player character off the roof, then switch to the second PC and use her body to push a third PC into a bear trap, then switch back to the first PC, who picks up a nasty shard of broken glass and then stumbles toward the trapped victim... So, each player character gets to alternate between being the monster and being the victim.

ESCAPING THE FARM

If the PCs drove here themselves, they can try escaping the same way. Run this as an Escape Pool (p. 70). The characters gain Escape Pool points by:

- Finding the truck in the garage or recovering their own vehicle

- Repairing their chosen vehicle (Eric sabotages the player character's car if he can)
- Finding maps in the farmhouse so they know where they are
- Incapacitating Eric's mother
- Giving Eric a victim to distract him

Eric's obvious reaction to an attempted escape is to try to possess the driver and crash the car into a ditch, while his mother tries to shoot the tires out.

If they try running cross-country on foot, run it as a chase (p. 39). Eric and his mother know where the bear traps are, and Eric will steer his victims into the traps to slow them down.

ERIC'S VICTORY

If there's only one surviving player character, then it's all over. Eric possesses that victim. It's not like a *Fugue State* — there's no merciful oblivion. Instead, it's like being one of Eric's botched taxidermy projects. He rips the unfortunate victim's soul apart, clumsily, tearing it piece by piece. He doesn't do a clean job, either, so the victim still has some smeared slivers of self-awareness left as Teller crams his own consciousness into the host.

DEFEATING TELLER

Any of these methods might work. Drop hints with Investigative Abilities if needed (suggested abilities are in parentheses).

Thaumazine: The drug seems to have triggered or enhanced Eric's psychic powers, allowing him to survive beyond death. Maybe enough of the drug could do the same for one of the PCs. If the characters have any thaumazine on them, they could pool it all. Otherwise, searching the house with **Notice** could dig up the stash stolen from Austin Spetz. When a character takes an overdose (10 or more pills), roll a d6. On a 6, the character gains a psychic power of the GM's choice, and starts with 3 points in that pool. On a 1-5, the character loses that much Health. (Or, if the character is the last survivor or it's dramatically appropriate, then the character automatically gets the psychic powers, but still has to roll for Health loss.) A psychically active character can blast Teller, driving his spirit away into the Outer Dark (and that character will inevitably suffer

the same fate when he or she dies...) (**Notice, Occult Studies, Medicine**)

Alternatively, if the PCs can stay alive for long enough, they'll burn the thaumazine out of their systems. Assume that if a character is down to -6 Stability, they're no longer vulnerable to Teller's possession.

Human Weakness: Teller may be dead, but he's still human. The characters could try exploiting his emotions to confuse him or slow him down. They could remind him that he's fulfilling his hated father's plans for him, or threaten his mother, or remind him of Cari Hannigan, the test subject who died in a car crash. Distracting him breaks the psychic connection between Teller and the player characters. (**Bullshit Detector, Humanities, Intimidate**)

A Trap: Teller will be destroyed if he takes a host and then dies. A self-sacrificing hero could absorb Teller just before dying. Alternatively, the characters could trick Teller into choosing a dying host, or feed thaumazine to the dogs and trap him in an animal's body, or maybe

even David Teller's relatively fresh corpse. (**Medicine, Occult Studies**)

Defeating Eric Teller ends the threat.

EPILOGUE

Scene Type: Aftermath

Lead-In: *Running the Gauntlet*

Who survived? And at what cost?

If you're using this as a one-shot, then let each player narrate what happens to their character in the weeks and months that follow their experiences at the Teller farm. Do they try to put the horror behind them, or are they unable to move past those terrible hours?

If you want to continue the story, the investigators could work together to explore the connection between David Teller, Bluegold Research's investors, and the Outer Dark...

Fear Itself

CHARACTER SHEET

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Ben Hunt

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Struggling Ex-Addict

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities ..1..
- Languages
- Law ..1..
- Occult Studies
- Research
- Social Sciences ..1..
- Trivia
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector ..1..
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk ..1..
- Flattery
- Flirting
- Impersonate
- Interrogation
- Intimidation ..1..
- Negotiation
- Reassurance
- Streetwise ..1..
-
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival
- Photography
- Science
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics ..2..
- Driving ..2..
- Filch ..6..
- Fleeing ..4..
- Health ..8..
- Hiding ..4..
- Infiltration ..4..
- Mechanics ..2..
- Medic ..2..
- Preparedness ..2..
- Scuffling ..4..
- Sense Trouble ..4..
- Shooting
- Shrink ..2..
- Stability ..6..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-

BACKGROUND : You went through a dark patch there for a few years. You lost nearly everything, and made things worse by pissing away what was left. You stole to support your habit, because it was all you had left.

Two years ago, things changed. It was that or die, and you figured you still had something to do with your life. You pulled yourself out of the gutter. Went to rehab, got clean, got a job. Cut your old buddies out of your life, cleaned yourself up. Now, if you walked through your old neighborhood, you don't know if they'd recognize you.

You don't have much. You're still getting back on your feet. You've got your pride, though, and you try not to let others see how far you fell.

To earn a little extra cash, you signed up for a pharmaceutical testing program. It's been really good, actually — the money's OK, but you've sort of bonded with the other test subjects. You meet up once a month to get your samples. You were nervous at first about taking the pills — you have, as they say, an addiction-prone personality, to put it mildly — but this thaumazine stuff just tastes like chalk, and doesn't seem to do much else. Maybe you're getting a dummy — a placebo, they call it. The drug's supposed to make you smarter or something. The smartest moment of your life was two years ago, when you decided to try again. Now, you're determined to make a difference, to make something with this second chance you've been given.



Fear Itself

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Jenni Maldonado

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Ambitious Undercover Journalist

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

BACKGROUND : You're a freelance journalist, trying to make a name for yourself. You've got a blog, and you've sold a few pieces to local newspapers and magazines, but you're still waiting for that break. It's frustrating that it hasn't happened yet. You feel like you're running out of time, and it's taking its toll on you. If this story doesn't pan out, what are you doing with your life?

Right now, you're working on a piece about clinical trials of experimental drugs. There's a company in town, Bluegold Research, that's running Phase 1 trials of some new drug. Thing is, you've heard rumors that there was a previous trial of the same drug, and something went wrong. The whole thing's been hushed up, and the company's rumored to be running out of money.

To get the inside scoop, you volunteered for the new trial. So far, it strikes you as sloppy and underfunded, but that's all. You need to push, find out more. You believe that one of the other participants, Austin Spetz, was part of an earlier trial of the drug — was he in the trial that got covered up? Does he know more? You've tried asking him questions, but you have to be careful — if Bluegold realizes you're a journalist, they'll cut you out, and you need this story.

You *need* something to happen.

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities
- Languages ..1..
- Law
- Occult Studies
- Research ..1..
- Social Sciences
- Trivia
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector ..1..
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk
- Flattery ..1..
- Flirting
- Impersonate
- Interrogation
- Intimidation
- Negotiation
- Reassurance
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure ..1..
- Medicine ..1..
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival
- Photography ..1..
- Science
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics ..2..
- Driving ..2..
- Filch ..4..
- Fleeing ..8..
- Health ..8..
- Hiding ..2..
- Infiltration ..4..
- Mechanics
- Medic ..2..
- Preparedness ..4..
- Scuffling ..2..
- Sense Trouble ..4..
- Shooting ..2..
- Shrink ..4..
- Stability ..8..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-

Fear Itself

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Sarah Bulzmann

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Bitter Nurse

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

BACKGROUND : You used to be a nurse in a care home. There was an accident — a confusion over medications, not your fault — but you can't work while the investigation is hanging over you, and you just know that baby-faced little prick of a doctor is going to try blaming the whole thing on you.

Right now, you're working for a company called Bluegold Research, helping run a clinical trial for a drug. A performing monkey or a college freshman could handle this — every month, you hand out a few questionnaires, check the participants' vital signs, and hand out a month's supply of thaumazine. It's supposed to improve concentration and emotional stability — a Ritalin for the 21st century, according to some marketing flyer you once saw. You've seen little evidence that it does anything so far, but as long as the checks from Bluegold keep coming, you'll keep handing out the pills.

You get on well with the test subjects in your group, but you've a soft spot for Austin Spetz. He's a funny little old man, always so merry and friendly, like everyone's favorite granddad. The thought of him ending up like some of the patients in the home sickens you — he's too full of life and cheer to deserve that.

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities ..1..
- Languages
- Law
- Occult Studies
- Research
- Social Sciences ..1..
- Trivia
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector
- Bureaucracy ..1..
- Cop Talk
- Flattery
- Flirting ..1..
- Impersonate
- Interrogation
- Intimidation
- Negotiation
- Reassurance ..1..
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine ..1..
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival
- Photography
- Science ..1..
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics ..4..
- Driving ..2..
- Filch
- Fleeing ..4..
- Health ..8..
- Hiding ..4..
- Infiltration
- Mechanics ..2..
- Medic ..6..
- Preparedness ..4..
- Scuffling ..4..
- Sense Trouble ..4..
- Shooting
- Shrink ..6..
- Stability ..8..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-

Fear Itself

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Greg Norris

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Shattered Veteran

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

BACKGROUND : It's been several years since you finished your last tour, and you still haven't really come home. Hell, that's literally true, right — there's a measurable percentage of you smeared across a hillside near Kabul. What fraction of a human body is a right foot, anyway?

The prosthetic they got you works OK, although you're not going to be competing in any track and field events anytime soon. You haven't found a job you can stick with either, and money's tight. To make ends meet, you signed up for a clinical drug trial. The drug, thaumazine, is supposed to help you control your emotions; you figured maybe you could get paid and get better.

It hasn't worked yet, but at least you've gotten to know the other people in the trial group. Sometimes, talking to them, you forget that you're still broken. You're especially close with one older guy, Austin Spetz — he's an aficionado of military history, so you've spent a few evenings together in the local bar, talking about long-lost battles and dead people. It helped put a bit of distance between the past and the present. Maybe if you keep talking to him, all the stuff you carry will end up being as remote and distant as those old battles. You'll be able to talk about Kabul the same way you talk about Gettysburg or the Normandy beaches.

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities
- Languages ..1..
- Law
- Occult Studies
- Research
- Social Sciences
- Trivia
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector ..1..
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk ..1..
- Flattery
- Flirting
- Impersonate
- Interrogation ..1..
- Intimidation ..1..
- Negotiation ..1..
- Reassurance
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival ..1..
- Photography
- Science
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics ..4..
- Driving
- Filch
- Fleeing
- Health ..10.
- Hiding ..2..
- Infiltration ..2..
- Mechanics ..4..
- Medic ..4..
- Preparedness ..2..
- Scuffling ..8..
- Sense Trouble ..2..
- Shooting ..8..
- Shrink
- Stability ..6..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-



Fear Itself

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Brian Curdy

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Geeky Student

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

BACKGROUND : You're studying programming at college. You're finding it a lot tougher than you expected — you were a bright kid, but you're falling behind in classes. It's too easy to goof off and waste time on the internet, breaking into computer networks, or hanging around with friends in distant states. Some of your classmates recommended buying illegal prescription-only concentration-booster drugs, but you've found an even better life hack for that.

You've signed up for a clinical drug trial for a concentration-boosting drug. Not only do they give you a supply every month, but they pay you too. You definitely feel smarter and more focused since starting the thaumazine trials.

A few days ago, though, it all went wrong. You got mugged on your way home — this crazy junkie just knocked you over and stole your wallet. Go you, crazy junkie dude — he scored, like, twenty bucks and a Subway loyalty card. Luckily, it happened near this crazy museum where another guy in the test group works, Austin Spetz, and he was able to patch you up, calm you down, and loan you bus money.

When you got home, you discovered you'd lost something else too — the junkie also stole the thaumazine pills you'd been hoarding for finals. Fortunately, your next monthly meeting and re-up is today, so you won't be without your smart drugs for long...

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities
- Languages
- Law
- Occult Studies
- Research ..1..
- Social Sciences
- Trivia ..1..
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector ..1..
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk
- Flattery
- Flirting
- Impersonate
- Interrogation
- Intimidation
- Negotiation ..1..
- Reassurance ..1..
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use ..1..
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival
- Photography
- Science ..1..
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics ..4..
- Driving ..2..
- Filch
- Fleeing ..8..
- Health ..7..
- Hiding ..4..
- Infiltration ..2..
- Mechanics ..4..
- Medic ..2..
- Preparedness ..6..
- Scuffling ..2..
- Sense Trouble ..4..
- Shooting
- Shrink ..4..
- Stability ..7..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-



Fear Itself

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME : Allie O'Brien

CHARACTER CONCEPT : Flaky Student

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

BACKGROUND : You're majoring in... well, it's all so *interesting*, isn't it? You don't want to get locked into something that you're not going to absolutely *love*, right? You want to find out what you're meant to do, and that means trying a bit of everything. Find out what speaks to you. Lately, you've been thinking about history. Or folklore. Or psychology. Or maybe creative writing. You're pretty sure you've got a really strong aura.

Your parents don't understand your quest for meaning, so you've had to scrimp together cash. For example, you've signed up to this clinical trial. You're not sure if you believe in drugs, but there's a good chance you're getting placebos, because you don't feel any different. And the other people in the trial are mostly interesting too, so that's a bonus. Maybe you're *meant* to be in this group of people. Maybe one of them has something important to teach you, so you can find your purpose. Right now, you think maybe it's Austin Spetz — he's, like, a million years old and he works in a museum, so he's got to be *wise*, right?

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History ..1..
- Humanities
- Languages
- Law
- Occult Studies ..1..
- Research
- Social Sciences
- Trivia ..1..
-
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk
- Flattery
- Flirting ..1..
- Impersonate ..1..
- Interrogation
- Intimidation
- Negotiation
- Reassurance ..1..
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine
- Notice ..1..
- Outdoor Survival ..1..
- Photography
- Science
-
-

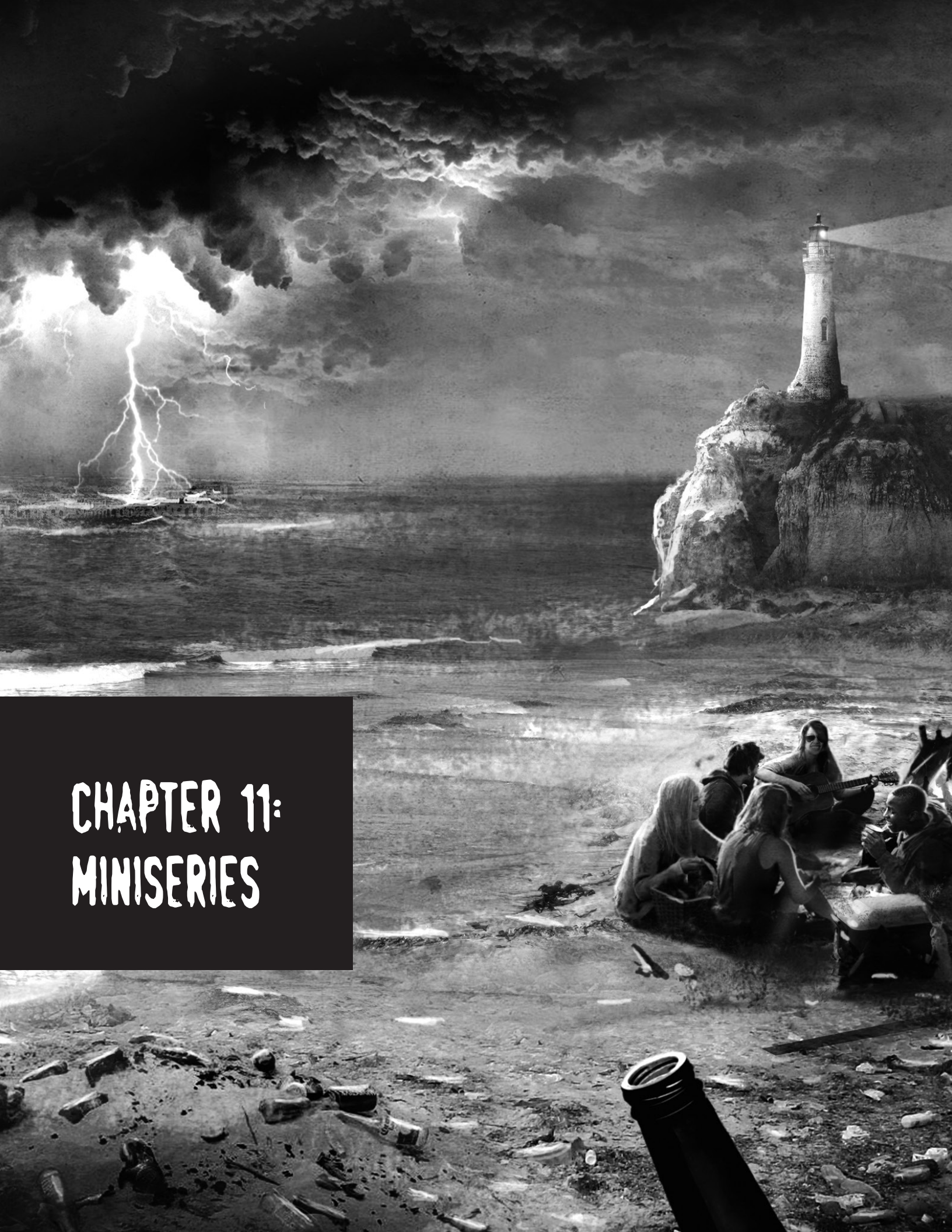
GENERAL

- Athletics ..6..
- Driving ..4..
- Filch
- Fleeing ..10.
- Health ..6..
- Hiding
- Infiltration ..4..
- Mechanics ..2..
- Medic ..4..
- Preparedness ..4..
- Scuffling ..2..
- Sense Trouble ..4..
- Shooting
- Shrink ..4..
- Stability ..9..
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-





**CHAPTER 11:
MINISERIES**

The defining element of a miniseries is that it's conceived as one big, overarching story, spanning several game sessions. It's got a beginning, a middle — and, most importantly, an end. The players know, from the very start, that the game will *definitely* finish after a predetermined number of sessions. That certainty is liberating in lots of ways — players feel that they can take big decisions and make dramatic sacrifices in the final session, as they've got nothing to lose by playing large. The fixed length of the campaign also limits the commitment required from players, which can be a great boon for some groups. An open-ended campaign is like joining a sports team or a weekly poker night, assuming that the players can make an indefinite gap in their schedules to play that game and nothing else. A six-session miniseries is better suited to busy players, or flighty players who want to try the cool new game of the month instead of committing to one campaign for a year.

SERIES PITCH

Before creating characters for a miniseries, the GM should prepare a series pitch — a briefing document for the players, describing what they need to know before they start coming up with characters. This can be written up as a document and circulated to the players, or delivered in person at the start of the character creation session. The series pitch contains:

- The title of the miniseries. Something short and evocative. (*"This series is Cocytus — it's the ninth circle of Hell in the Inferno, the frozen lake where Satan was trapped."*)
- A one-sentence preview or "logline" for the series. (*"Demons invade a town isolated by a blizzard."*)
- An outline of the setting. (*"It's a small town, somewhere that gets a lot of snow and is sufficiently isolated to be cut off for a few days. I'm assuming Alaska unless any of you has a better idea. Here's a sketch map of the town, notes on a few major GMCs, and some key locations."*)

- Suggestions of the sort of characters that would suit the series — as well as any character types that would be utterly wrong for the game. Alternatively, the GM could provide a set of pregenerated characters that fit with the game. (*"You're all the sort of people who'd help out when danger threatens — the town doctor, outdoors types who know how to cope with bad weather, maybe the local pastor, strong and reliable college-age kids. You're all the sort of people who'd go out to an isolated farmhouse in response to a call for help. One of you can be a sheriff's deputy; however, none of the rest should have any official authority."*)
- Notes on the planned feel of the game and the sort of horror that the players might expect to encounter. Often, this is best achieved by referencing classic works of horror and weirdness. (*"It's Thirty Days of Night meets The Exorcist. And each session is going to take place over one day and one night, so we'll play through the six days that the town is cut off from the outside world."*)

CHARACTER CREATION

Character creation for a miniseries uses the standard rules, with one caveat — the GM should pay very close attention to the players' choice of abilities and background. A miniseries needs to be very tightly constrained, so steer players back toward the concepts outlined in the series pitch, and rein in any wild flights of inspiration. If your six-episode miniseries is about demons tormenting the snowbound residents of a town, and one player suggests that her character is an amnesiac girl with psychic powers who turns up with the first snowfall, then you need to make sure that you can incorporate that concept into your story. Otherwise, the players are likely to fixate on the mystery of the amnesiac psychic instead of the demons. When plotting a miniseries, you need to be careful to avoid distracting concepts that might dominate the game¹; you also need to make sure that the players do likewise.

¹ Oddly, this isn't as big a deal in a one-shot. If the players have only a single session to solve the mystery of the snowbound town, then they're going to correctly assume that references to, say, a secret demon fortress in Brazil are just flavor. If the players have six sessions to tackle the mystery, then they might try following those throwaway references to Brazil, sending your game spinning out of control.

If you run into such a problem, try being more explicit about which clues are core and which ones aren't.

MINISERIES RISK FACTORS

You can use pregenerated characters as described on p. 101, or have the players create their own. If you do use pregenerated characters, it's also a good idea to use Questionnaire Risk Factors, so the players can put their own spin on your pregens.

SPIRAL OF MISERY

The Spiral of Misery connects the player characters in a chain of friendships and obligations, lashing them together so they'll all be dragged into the darkness as a group. It's especially effective in a miniseries because you can spend the first session exploring their particular Spiral of Misery, building the group from the inside out. In essence, the Spiral of Misery is a set of Core Clues connecting the player characters.

Work out the Spiral of Misery before actually building the characters — don't allocate points to Investigative or General Abilities until after you know how the characters relate to one another.

Here's how it works. Ask the players to nominate which of them will be at the center of the Spiral. That player suggests a character concept that he or she would be interested in playing, drawn from the suggested concepts in the series pitch.

- *I'm the town doctor — I used to be a high-flying surgeon in the big city, but I had trouble with drug addiction and came out here to get away from pressure and temptation.*
- *I'm the scrappy kid, eager to prove that I'm all grown up. Maybe I stowed away in the pickup truck when you all drove out into the blizzard.*
- *I'm the weather reporter for the local TV station, out reporting on the storm.*

This is the character who initially discovers or is threatened by the horror, the patient zero of the contagion. This character is the main protagonist at the start of the game, although there's no guarantee of that being true throughout. (Jonathan Harker is at the center of the Spiral of Misery in *Dracula*, but he's hardly the protagonist; for that matter, look at *Psycho*, where Marion Crane appears to be the heroine until she's killed early on.)

The player of the central character then nominates one other player. That player must then come up with a character concept connected to the central character by a strong emotional tie — a close friendship, a familial bond, a powerful obligation. Something that ensures that the second character would always try to protect and help the first.

OK, if you're playing the doctor, then I'll be your buddy who moved to this small town years earlier. I'm the one who convinced you to move out here so you could kick your drug habit — I've been your confidante, your counselor, and the one who'll kick your ass if you think about relapsing.

All right — if you're the scrappy kid, I'll be a grizzled older guy. I knew your father, kid, and he asked me to look out for you before he died.

I'll be your doggedly loyal camera guy.

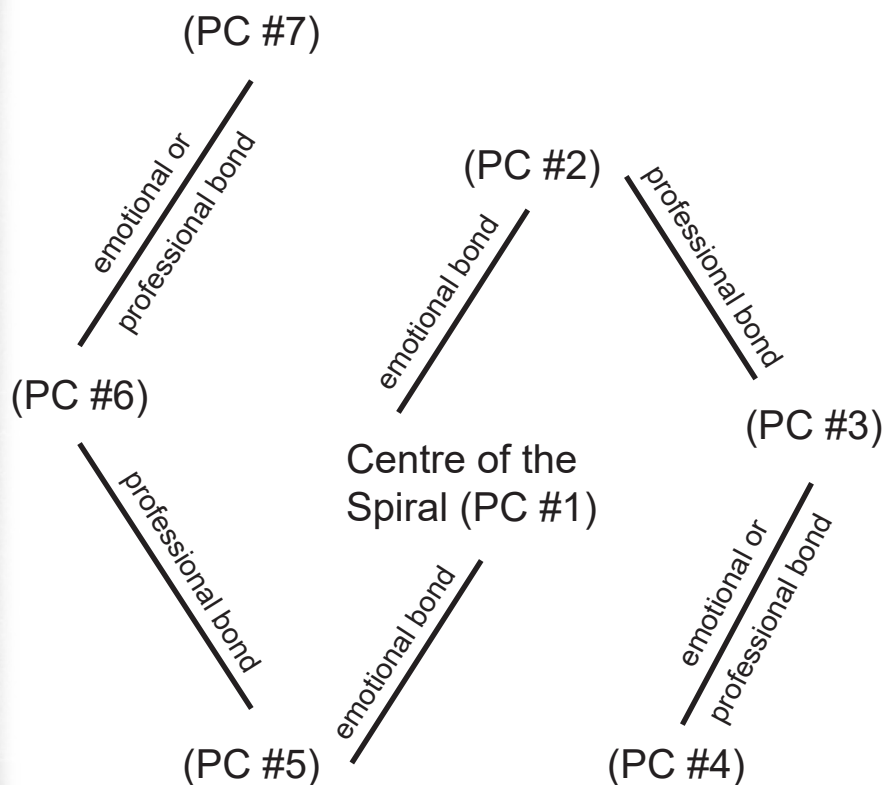
The second player then nominates a third player to come up with a concept. This time, the bond between the two characters can be a professional one instead of an emotional one. The third character might be someone the first two turn to because of what they do — an occult expert, police officer, or specialist in a particular field. The third character is known to the second character — he or she is their go-to expert for questions of this type.

The GM might suggest the sort of expert that would be really, really useful in this miniseries (*"Let's just say there's going to be a lot of stuff here about folklore, so having someone with lots of Occult Studies will help"*), or include such details in the series pitch.

For the fourth character, the bond can be emotional or professional — third player's choice.

If you have more than four players, then do a second branch of the spiral, starting back with the central character.

Using the Spiral of Misery: The spiral maps the first session of your miniseries. You know that the central character is going to run into something weird and disturbing; that central character will then turn to a close friend (character #2 on the spiral), who'll suggest they consult with an expert (character #3), and so on. It gives each player a scene that focuses entirely on their character's introduction to the story, and lets you build the group over the course of the first session, instead of starting with the whole team already assembled.



The Spiral as Risk Factor: Refusing to ask for help from the next person out on the spiral is a **Soft Risk Factor** (see p. 50), costing 2 Stability points. Denying assistance, disbelieving, or allowing the next person on the spiral to go into danger is a **Hard Risk Factor** (see p. 50), costing 4 Stability points or one-third of the character's Stability, whichever is higher.

The Spiral and amateur investigators: The Spiral rules make two important assumptions about the player characters:

They're the sort of people who'd have experts and authority figures they can turn to.

They've got the opportunity to seek out and recruit the other people in the Spiral.

The first assumption might not fit every miniseries — if you've pitched a story about high-school students fighting monsters, then it may be tricky to find a plausible expert in an obscure field who hangs around with teenage kids. That said, there's nothing stopping an "expert" being a nerdy weird kid who learned all about the occult from roleplaying games (and, for that matter, there's a fine tradition of high-school librarians being remarkably well informed about the supernatural). If the idea of "finding an expert" doesn't fit with your series pitch, then make all the bonds emotional or familial ones.

Fear Itself

Fear Itself

The second assumption is that the central character encounters something horrific, and then has the time and opportunity to find help and support dealing with the threat before it strikes again. If you're planning an overwhelming, omnipresent danger, then the Spiral of Misery might take too long to play out.

QUESTIONNAIRES

Asking questions of your players lets you draw out their characters' buried secrets and hidden fears. By asking intrusive, hard-to-evade questions, you force the players to consider their characters in different, even uncomfortable ways.

Fear Itself 1st Edition asked each player to answer the question **"What's the worst thing you've ever done?"** for their character. This is a great question because it makes the player complicit in accusing and subsequently punishing their own character. It challenges the player to come up with a sin, a transgression that explains or justifies why that character deserves on some level to be tormented by Unremitting Horror. At the same time, it lets the player pick the degree of transgression — a character who's conceived as a moral paragon might count telling a white lie as the "worst thing I've ever done," while someone else counts "I made sure my alcoholic mother had enough booze to poison herself on the night she died, because I hated her" as their worst deed.

A good question first frames the character in an uncomfortable light. Don't ask **"Do you suffer from nightmares?"**, as the player might say no and give you nothing to work with. Instead, start with the unstated assumption that a *Fear Itself* protagonist is the sort of person who suffers from persistent nightmares, and go from there.

Some other things to keep in mind when setting questions:

- If you need a particular fact to be true for your series pitch to work, frame a question around it. For example, if your main plot involves a family curse that afflicts all the player characters, then don't ask **"Tell me about your family"**; instead, ask each player to describe a single relative, and use those answers to build a shared family tree.

- Questions can shape a campaign in multiple ways. Take the question **"What's in your pockets? In your go-bag¹, if you have one?"** That not only gives the player scope to think about the character's personality (*"Do I have pockets full of receipts and other junk, or am I scrupulously neat? What gadgets or tools do I have on me? What's in my wallet?"*) but also lets the player seed future scenes — if a player mentions she always carries flares and a crowbar in her go-bag, that's a cue for the GM to include opportunities to use flares or a crowbar. It also hints that the characters are the sort of people who expect disaster at any moment.

- Get as much use as you can out of your questions. Asking questions like **"What's your favorite food?"** or **"What social media do you use?"** helps flesh out a character's personality, but you can get the same benefit and also build setting or plot hooks by making the questions more specific. **"Where's your favorite place to eat in town?"** adds a location you can use, as well as letting the player choose between kale salad or fried chicken as a personality marker. **"What's the weirdest thing you've seen lately on social media?"** gives the player a chance to drop a plot hook in your lap.

- Using questions to personalize the horror is a great approach, but be oblique in how you use the players' responses. For example, if you ask **"What's your biggest fear?"** in a game called *Fear Itself*, then the players will reasonably and correctly assume that they're going to encounter whatever they give as their answer. If they say "spiders," they're going to meet something spidery. If they say "drowning," they'll meet a monster in a lake, or a water demon like a Klootie or Drowner from *The Book of Unremitting Horror*. Anticipation of horror is one thing, but you don't want to be too obvious. So, use the players' responses indirectly, creatively, or metaphorically. Don't just drop spiders on an arachnophobic character; have her encounter a serial killer who secretes webbing from his mouth and has bristly black hair on his lanky arms and legs. Have the character who fears drowning find the body of a GM character who drowned.

¹ A go-bag, also known as a bug-out bag, among other names, is a bag that contains enough gear to survive for at least 72 hours in the wild. The idea is that you can grab the bag as you flee your home, secure in the confidence that you can make it through the next three days. It's a concept beloved by those living in disaster-prone areas, apocalypse preppers, and player characters.

Include at least one question that's a hidden Risk Factor. Ask a question that will drive the player characters toward solving the mystery of the miniseries.

Handling questionnaires — some practicalities:

Don't ask too many questions. A single page is more than enough.

You can give the same set of questions to all the players, or personalize them.

Keep copies of the players' answers for yourself, but return the filled-out questionnaires to the players as part of their character sheet packets.

Questionnaires as Risk Factors: If a player's actions in a game don't quite fit with an answer given to a question ("I know I said I'm really curious about the supernatural, but I'm scared to go in there"), it's a **Soft Risk Factor** (p. 50) costing 2 Stability. If the player goes completely against an answer ("I know I said Bob is my best friend, but I'm going to ignore his panicked cries and run away"), that's a **Hard Risk Factor** (p. 50) and costs 4 Stability or one-third of the character's remaining Stability pool.

Sample Questions

- What keeps you awake at night?
- Describe your most recent vivid nightmare.
- You have an unexplained injury or scar. Describe it.
- How do you work off stress?
- When was the last time you attended a church service?
- Have you made a will?
- Which of the other player characters do you trust the most? The least?
- You know one thing about another player character that he or she doesn't know. What is it?
- What's your zombie invasion survival strategy? Come on, you know you have one...
- What strange thing did you see outside your house recently?
- In what circumstances could you see yourself as a hero?

DESIGNING A MINISERIES

All the advice in *Chapter 5: Designing a Mystery* (p. 52) holds true for miniseries.

CORE MYSTERY

Start by coming up with a concept for your mystery. This is the question that will drive your miniseries, although the player characters may not necessarily find the answer. Some suggestions:

- Why have the dead returned to a small town?
- What happened to the survivors of the orphanage fire twenty years ago?
- Who killed the girl whose body washed up on the lakeshore?
- What is the sinister plot of the Esoterrorist cabal in town?
- What does the Ovvashi (p. 84) intend?
- Will the crime boss succeed in using a Cuckoo Mother (p. 94) to escape the spiritual debt he owes to the Outer Dark?

Sketch out the Core Clues that will bring the player characters from the investigation trigger to the end of the mystery.

NUMBER OF EPISODES

Next, decide on how long your miniseries will last — three to eight episodes is a good number, but consider the average length of your game sessions and the needs of your group. One option is to have one episode per player, plus two more, which gives you a starting episode, one episode that focuses on each player character, and then a finale.

LIST OF REVELATIONS

Take your Core Clues and divide them among your episodes. Remember that most of your first episode will be taken up with introducing the player characters and establishing the setting, and that most of the last game session will be the final confrontation and the aftermath, so the bulk of the investigation will happen in the middle episodes.

Fear Itself

Leave some Core Clues as Floating Clues (see p. 58 for details on how to handle these).

In the heat of play, you probably won't stick precisely to this list. The players may find some Core Clues faster than you anticipated, and other ones may have to wait a long time to be discovered. Be flexible.

Some sample lists of revelations:

- Why have the dead returned to a small town?
 - o One of the player characters died years ago and never noticed (she thought the drug overdose was nonfatal).
 - o There are legends of a portal to the land of the dead.
 - o Someone is kidnapping the returned dead.
 - o You can call back specific dead people using a ritual.
 - o The recent mass outbreak is because of a botched ritual by a particular GMC.
- Will the crime boss succeed in using a Cuckoo Mother (p. 94) to escape the spiritual debt he owes to the Outer Dark?
 - o There's a civil war going on between two factions of organized criminals, and both sides are interested in the player characters for some reason.
 - o The abandoned, unfinished skyscraper is a weird other-place where reality breaks down and strange creatures dwell.
 - o One of the factions of criminals is stalked by a horrible serial killing monster from the Outer Dark.
 - o One of the player characters is actually the reincarnation of the mob boss; only by accepting his true soul and annihilating his identity can he stop the serial killing monster.

BUILDING A SETTING

A miniseries usually takes place in a single setting — a small town, a neighborhood in a city, a subculture, a region. Design your setting in broad strokes and don't get too bogged down in details. A handful of evocative locations and GM characters is better than a long list of places and characters that the players will never interact with.

If you're using the Spiral of Misery approach, then consider associating each player character with a different key location. The central character meets her best friend at the local café they all hang out at; they meet the spooky occult expert in the old deserted church. The spiral is designed to space out the introductions of the

player characters so they each have a chance to make a strong first impression; it can be used to do the same with locations or factions in your setting.

If you're using a questionnaire, then get the players to help build the setting through their answers. Let them create landmarks and GMCs, and then work them into your mystery. Use directed questions if you need specific locations, while giving the players a chance to make the setting their own. For example, if your core mystery needs a lake, then ask one player **"Why does the lake make you nervous?"**

Writing GMCs and locations on notecards, or providing the players with maps of the area, is often very helpful. Physical reminders focus the players' attention; a corkboard on the wall instantly puts players in mind of police procedurals and investigations.

DESIGN AND TIMING

A miniseries poses a tricky question of timing for the GM. You want to build the setting around the player characters as much as possible, and you also want plenty of time in advance to design a compelling mystery. But it's rarely feasible to have a long gap between creating the characters and running the first session of a miniseries (*"Hi guys, we'll make characters this week, and then we'll play again next summer"*).

The solution is to leave a few gaps and blank spaces in your mystery where you can slot in elements created by the players. If your core plot is about what happened to a group of orphans who were subjected to weird psychic experiments when they were children, then leave the current status of one or two of the orphans undetermined. Then, when the players fill out their backgrounds, you can link everything together. (*OK, the players have decided that all their characters hang out at this bar. Well, the bartender can be one of the orphans, and his death can be the investigative trigger. And Michelle's said that her character doesn't know who her father is, so obviously he's another one of the psychic orphans, and her character can develop psychic powers over the course of the series...*)

DRIVING TO A CLIMAX

To be certain of ending a miniseries on time, build in a forced move or other time limit (see p. 106 for explanations of these concepts). Make this an optional subplot, and use it only if you need to push the players toward a final decision.

CREATING SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

In a one-shot, most GM characters only show up in a single scene or a single game session. In a campaign, you've a small recurring cast, but most GMCs are still only around for a single session at most, before the players move on to the next monster of the week.

A miniseries, by contrast, has a cast of supporting characters who are more or less constant throughout all the episodes (mysterious arrivals and gruesome exits aside). Some useful tricks for creating GMCs for a miniseries:

Note down **what's publicly known or easily discovered** about a character, what can be discovered with **investigation**, and what's **secret**. The players learn the first layer of information easily, have to dig for the second, and have to dig really deep to find the third.

Come up with three distinctive traits for each GMC. One should illustrate their personality through some habit (a nervous character always checks the exits; a commanding character runs the conversation like he's chairing a meeting); one should be a descriptive hook (a mechanic always cleans his hands with an oily rag; the town librarian always wears a hideous green jacket); and the last is a tic or speech pattern that the GM can easily portray (the nervous character repeats everyone's names so she doesn't forget them; the commanding guy squares his shoulders and doesn't slouch).

Give each GMC a goal or desire. This doesn't necessarily have to connect with the overall mystery — the lonely librarian's search for love may have nothing to do with the impending demonic apocalypse, but it means she isn't a passive clue dispenser when the players talk to her.

Example drivers:

- The gateway to the land of the dead emerges from the ground in an earthquake.
- The mob boss kidnaps family members of the player characters, and demands they come to the abandoned skyscraper or he'll start killing them.
- The Esoterrorist cabal begins the ritual, and reality starts to collapse, starting with the area around their isolated compound. They're safe; they're the eye of the hurricane.

THE FINALE

The final act of the miniseries must be in the hands of the players. Their decisions are what tips the balance one way or another. While it's permissible for the GM to decide on what would happen if the player characters don't intercede, make sure the players are able to affect the final outcome.

Horror games aren't about defeat — a painful and costly victory is more fitting than a futile defeat. Reward sacrifice and clever investigation by giving players a chance to thwart the machinations of the Outer Dark.

Staying Flexible

Nothing in a roleplaying game happens until it happens at the table. Everything in the GM's preparations and notes are just possibilities until they're actually encountered by the players. To run a compelling mystery, you'll need to have a plot *planned* in advance, but be willing to change that plan immediately to accommodate the actions of the players. Know what's going to happen, but know it lightly.

Use your list of revelations as a guide. If there's a way for an unexpected question or action by one of the players to lead to one of those revelations, run with it.

Players have the most fun if they *believe* they're cracking an airtight, perfectly planned mystery, but they're *actually* the drivers of the story, and the course of events changes in response to their actions. It's a tricky balancing act for the GM, and one of the things that makes investigative roleplaying both difficult and immensely rewarding to run.

(And if the players don't seem to be interested in the heroic ideal of self-sacrifice, kill a couple of PCs off in the final scenes. The finale is the one part of a miniseries where the GM doesn't need to consider the consequences so closely!)

Give the players an epilogue, where you decide together what happens to the survivors. By now, the players have inhabited these characters for several weeks, and deserve a chance to wrap up subplots and say goodbye.

RUNNING A MINISERIES

All the advice and precepts in *Chapter 6: Running a Mystery* hold true in a miniseries, but also keep the following in mind.

FIRST-SESSION PRIORITIES

In your first session, you need to:

- Have an investigative trigger event to kick off the mystery
- Introduce the characters and sketch the setting

Give the players plenty of time to explore their characters in the first session. Use low-stakes directed scenes to give them something to play off ("*OK, Mike, you've just had a screaming row with your parents and walked out the door. Which of the other player characters do you seek out for support, and where do you meet?*"). Resist the temptation to run straight into the plot.

EVERYONE GETS A SPOTLIGHT

Ideally, give each player character one game session that focuses on their personality and backstory. While the main plot of each session is the investigation into the supernatural mystery, the subplot can deal with the story of one particular player character. (If you have more player characters than episodes, then look for ways to link the backstories and goals of two characters, so they can share a spotlight.)

Tell the players who's getting the spotlight this episode.

In the first two-thirds of the miniseries, make things more complicated and challenging with each spotlight episode. Have personal problems and family drama get in the way of the investigation. In the last third, try to draw threads together.

Often, when a player includes an event or a mystery in their character's backstory, it's really a justification for why their character acts in a certain way — "*My sister was abducted by aliens, so now I'm obsessed with UFOs.*" In a miniseries, there's little time for prevarication, so use spotlight episodes to delve into those mysteries. "*All right, Mike, it's your spotlight episode, so this week you're going to find out what happened to your sister...*"

EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

In the confined setting of a miniseries, where everything happens in a handful of locations and with a detailed recurring cast, look for ways to link the player character's personal plots into the bigger story. If a character is looking for her missing father (personal backstory), have him show up as a victim of an Ovvashi's machinations, or as a member of an Esoterrorist cell.

Having supernatural weirdness intrude on plots that the players intended to be wholly mundane can be very effective. Look for ways to take ordinary relationships or events and connect them to the central supernatural mystery.

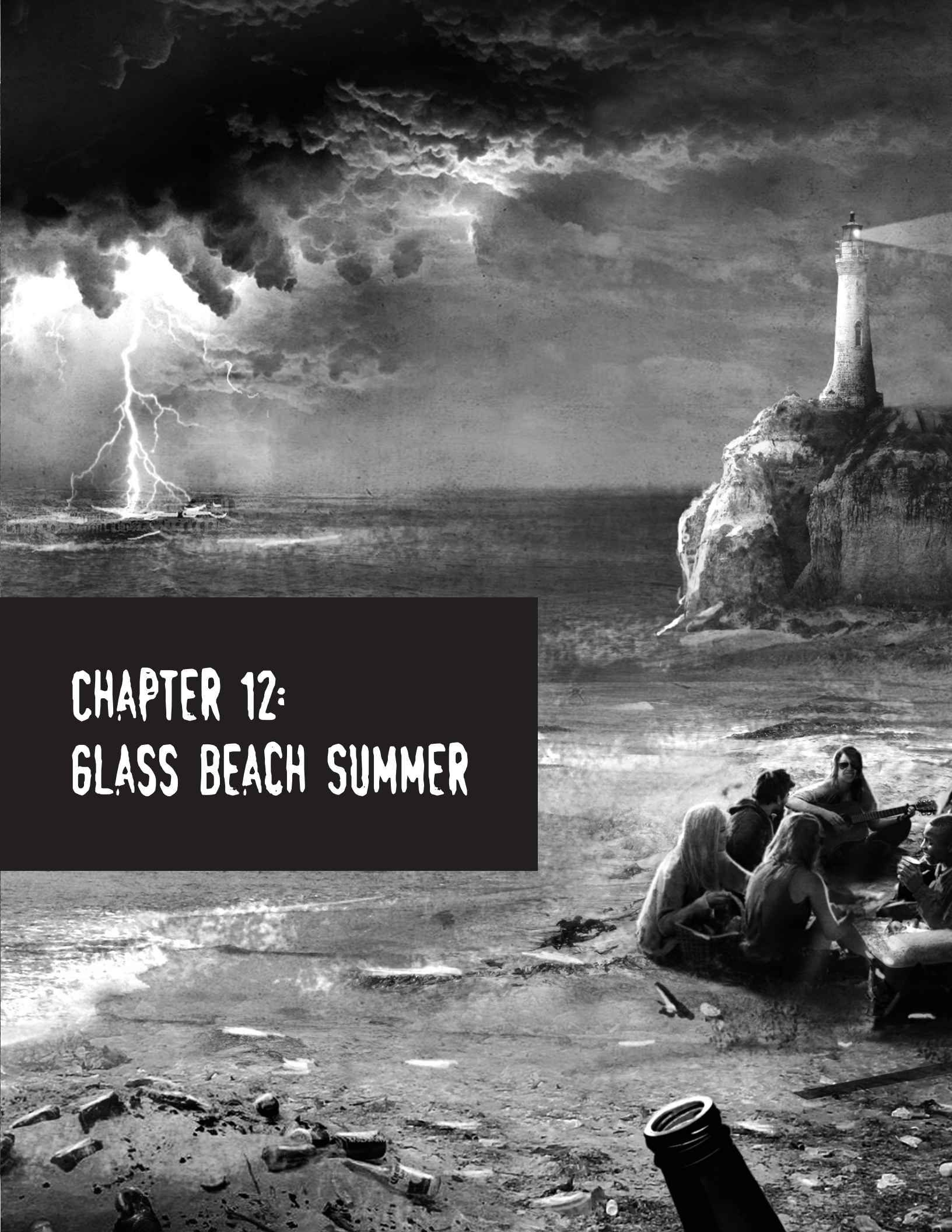
MISSING PLAYER TRAPDOORS

Players will inevitably miss sessions. Work deadlines, family emergencies and suchlike can prevent even the most diligent and enthusiastic players from attending. If you decide to go ahead with a reduced number of players, you'll need to explain why the missing player's character is absent. Don't just handwave an explanation ("*Oh, Sally can't make it, so her character is sick and has to stay in bed this week*") — work that absence into the story. A kidnapping, a possession, "missing time," a supernatural trance, or some other weird, dramatic event turns the problem of the absentee player into the mystery of the missing character.

When the absent player returns next session, use directed scenes to quickly run her through her character's side of things.

GO LOUD AT THE END

The final session of a miniseries is an opportunity to have big things happen. Unleash major supernatural threats, kill off Sources of Stability. Burn the setting you've spent weeks building. Don't hold anything back — go for big, dramatic scenes instead of subtlety. Force the players to take desperate moves by escalating the danger much more than usual.



**CHAPTER 12:
GLASS BEACH SUMMER**

Fear Itself

The storm changed everything.

It broke over the shore like nothing I'd ever seen before. Crashing waves above and below. Lightning flashing between sea and sky, these sheets of fire rushing across the clouds, and they found answers, not just reflections, in the black waters below. And the thunder — you know when you're at a concert, in the middle of the crowd, hot and sweaty, and you're lifted up by the swell of the music and the people around you, and it's like all the noise is somehow also the rushing of the blood in your body? It was like that, only you're all alone. Like the whole universe was lifting me up to dance in the storm.

We didn't mean to stay out all night, but the storm came out of nowhere. The tides rushed in, and we couldn't get to the track that goes back up the road. We had to stay down there in our little cove, with nothing between us and the storm. We danced all night, soaked to the skin.

I swear I saw the beach glowing, like the stones were all on fire.

The storm changed everything.

We went home, one by one. We all knew it had changed. We all knew that last night had been the night, the night that made us who we were going to be as long as we lived.

And then we started to see them. We saw the monsters.

At first, we thought the storm had brought them. We guessed that we'd fallen through a dimensional portal or something, or the storm was the start of an invasion, or that the storm had turned people into monsters.

It was only later that we learned the truth.

The storm changed only us. The monsters were always there.

Glass Beach Summer is an example miniseries. It's not complete — it's enough to be a model for your own miniseries, or you could fill in the gaps and adapt it to your own group. The basic concept is that the player characters are all teenagers spending a boring summer vacation in a seaside town. Place the town somewhere that evokes the right mix of cynicism and nostalgia for you. Maybe base it on childhood memories of a rainy summer, where you sat trapped inside a strange rented house, looking out at the endless grey rainclouds and playing terrible old board games with your equally frustrated siblings. Or base it on a spring break that never lived up to expectations. (Consider a period setting for this miniseries; if your group is mostly forty-somethings, then set it twenty or more years ago, and cue up a few nostalgic mid-'90s soundtracks as background music.)

The investigative trigger for the miniseries is a mysterious, violent storm that catches all the player characters and traps them on the beach for a night. Afterward, they each discover that they have developed psychic powers, including the ability to see through illusions — and there are Creatures of Unremitting Horror living in this quiet little seaside town.

Other people can't see them for what they are — only the player characters know what's really happening in town.

SERIES PITCH: GLASS BEACH SUMMER

A group of young people develop psychic powers after a storm, and discover monsters lurking in a quiet seaside town.

You're all staying in this small seaside town for a few weeks of the summer. There's nothing much to do here, so you've become friends and hang out together on the beach.

SETTING NOTES

The town (currently nameless, any suggestions?) is small and touristy in a boring way. There are a few antique stores, a few cafés and ice-cream parlors, maybe a dingy, run-down arcade with old video games, maybe a short boardwalk and a few nature trails, but not much else to do. It's especially sleepy this year, with bad weather and fewer tourists than usual.

Locations in and around the town:

- **Glass Beach:** Covered in washed-up trash and bits of broken glass; no one goes to Glass Beach apart from you guys. You've found a little sheltered cove that's mostly free from trash and it's become your hideaway. People have warned you that Glass Beach is dangerous; there are scare stories about chemical spills and industrial waste.
- **Main Beach:** This small, picturesque beach is the town's main (only?) tourist attraction.
- **Seaview Park:** Camper vans and RVs owned by visiting tourists. There's also a kids' playground here that's seen better days.
- **The Lighthouse:** The old lighthouse stands at the far end of Glass Beach, warning ships away from a dangerous shoal of underwater rocks. It was once staffed, but is now wholly automated.
- **Marlin House:** A big mansion, located just outside town. Someone recently moved in here, someone rich. They probably own one of the yachts moored offshore, too.
- **Town Library and Historical Society:** There's a library in town — if any of you ever want to do some research.
- **Porton West:** The nearest town of any size, Porton West is an industrial port.

One or two key GMCs (we'll add to this list during character creation):

- **Officer Smalls:** A local police officer who keeps an eye on your group.
- **Mr. Krief:** Krief owns a junkyard in town, and considers Glass Beach to be his personal fiefdom. He's not happy about your "trespassing," and has threatened to set his dogs on you if he catches you there.
- **Mrs. Wainwright:** The old librarian. Assumes visitors to her library under the age of forty must be up to some sort of mischief or perversion.
- **Lucas:** Runs a café/bar near Main Beach where you sometimes hang out. Lucas is cool.

CHARACTER TYPES

You're all young — mid-teens to very early twenties at most — and stuck here. The default assumption is that you've been dragged here by your family on an ill-conceived vacation. Other possibilities:

- You just moved to the town with your family, and it's your first summer living here.
- You've gotten a summer job here, and it's your first summer away from your parents.
- You're staying here with relatives you barely know, while your parents try to repair their fraying marriage by going off to Europe together.
- You've run away from home and are sleeping rough on Glass Beach.

If any of you want to be siblings, let me know.

SERIES NOTES

Please fill out the character questionnaire.

In the first session, you're going to develop supernatural abilities. These will use a variant of the regular psychic power rules from *Fear Itself*. You'll get some bonus Investigative Ability build points to spend on them, but if you want to keep some Ability points back, you can save up to 3 points for psychic stuff when you generate your character.

QUESTIONNAIRE

CHARACTER NAME:

Why are you in town this summer? Why can't you leave?

You recently pissed off someone in town other than Mr. Krief or Officer Smalls. Who was it? What happened? Was it your fault?

You've got a big secret that you've told nobody about. What is it?

One evening, when you were alone on Glass Beach, you heard a really strange noise. What did it sound like?

Add one location — a store, a landmark, anything — to the map of town. Name someone associated with that place.

You saw something weird in or around the town a few days ago that you've been meaning to check out. What is it?

There's a rock out in the bay near Glass Beach. It's hard to swim out that far, and there are dangerous riptides. Some of the other kids swam out to it — did you try? Did you make it all the way out?

What do grown-ups think when they see how you dress?

What do you have in your pockets?

How much trouble have you been in before? Have you been grounded? Arrested?

What are you going to do when summer ends?

Answer these two secretly once everyone's created their PCs:

Which of the others do you think you'll stay in touch with when you leave?

Which of the other characters needs your help?

GLASS BEACH SUMMER OUTLINE

After the storm that gives the characters their psychic powers, they discover that the town is haunted by monsters — several of the people living there aren't human. They are horrific creatures, who can cloak themselves and appear normal to most people, but not to psychics. Some of these creatures attempt to murder the player characters as soon as they notice they've been spotted.

Exploring the town, the characters find that there have been previous storms in the past, and that there's a cult in town that knows about the storms and plans to use the changes wrought by the phenomenon to gain magical power.

The twist is that the monsters and the psychic abilities are not separate — the player characters are doomed to mutate into horrible creatures that can only survive on Glass Beach. Do the characters give up their futures and join their fellow monsters in hiding, or sell out to the cult?

So, there are four key lines of investigation:

- The storm and its attendant phenomenon
- The monsters hiding in town
- The history of the town and previous attempts to understand the storm
- The creepy Esoterrorist cult that plans to take advantage of the player characters

THE STORM

The storm is a plot device. Don't give any definite explanations as to what causes the storm, or where it comes from. People might have theories — some of the cursed monsters might think it's the wrath of God, the cult might call it a reality breach or a tear in the Membrane, a physicist might discover that it showers the town in cosmic rays and speculate that it's a wavefront of strangelets.

The psychic abilities granted by the storm are the first step in transforming into a monster. After the storm, each player character gets 1 point in Veiling (see p. 146) and another 2 points to spend on other psychic abilities (see p. 72). (If you allow them to take high-powered General Ability psychic talents like Telekinesis, then

points spent there are tripled. For example, a character could start with Veiling 1, Telekinesis 6.)

The storm hits midway through the first session of the miniseries, when all the characters are gathered on Glass Beach. The easiest way to ensure all the player characters are present is to open the game with a directed scene where they plan a beach party, and then have a few scenes where each player character has to deal with some element of their backstory that threatens to keep them away (overprotective parents/a car that won't start/a run-in with Officer Smalls).

The storm is obviously unnatural — green lightning, hot rain, words in the thunder. The characters all know something has changed in them after the storm, and their new powers begin to manifest immediately.

Stormy Weirdness: Other disturbing images or concepts associated with the storm can be used as needed.

- During the storm, the characters glimpse ghostly figures leaping into the sea. During an intensely bright flash, they seem to see a weird alien city illuminated beneath the waters. (This is Briny Heaven, the ultimate objective of the *Ocean Game*.)
- After the storm, driftwood washes up on the beach. It's very strange driftwood, resembling nothing so much as twisted human forms. The driftwood pieces are too big to move easily. They appear to crawl farther up the beach when no one's looking at them.
- Several tall buildings in town, such as Marlin House, the library, the church and the lighthouse, have lightning rods. So do other, smaller buildings. Did someone try to attract or channel the storm?
- After the storm, Glass Beach is suddenly thronged with weird, soft pale crabs that try to build shells out of the glass pebbles.

Investigating the Storm:

- **Science:** Obviously, it wasn't a natural storm. But it had a physical component — it wasn't just some weird spiritual, psychic event. It's something that could be studied if you had the right equipment.

Fear Itself

- **Research:** There were similar storms in the town's past. The first one you can find reference to is more than a century ago, but there are more recent ones. It seems to recur around every five years or so on average. There's a reference to some experiments carried out by a Professor Klingsor, back in the early '90s.
- **Outdoor Survival:** Animals can predict storms, and the birds around town still look nervous to you. There's going to be another storm soon.
- **Messenger:** You can hear voices on the wind, whispering secrets to you.

Veiling

The Veiling Investigative Ability lets the characters see through the supernatural veil that protects the monsters of the town. Sometimes, when a monster's disguise slips for a moment, it gives Core Clues for free. Otherwise, the investigators have to spend to see through the Veil — spend 1 Veiling to examine someone nearby. If they're a monster, you see through their disguise. If they're not, the point is spent anyway.

The second use of Veiling is to become invisible to humans. A player who spends 1 point of Veiling automatically passes a Hiding test, no matter the difficulty. This only works on humans; monsters can see through the Veil. Offer to allow a player to spend Veiling when a really critical Hiding test arises in the game.

Clever players may draw the connection between their new-found Veiling ability and the power of the monsters to conceal themselves, foreshadowing the horrific twist.

THE MONSTERS

Some of the townsfolk are monsters, hidden behind veils. Once, they were human, before a previous storm transformed them. Like the player characters, it started with the development of psychic powers, but over the weeks and months that followed, the changes got worse. They mutated into horrible, inhuman monsters, and discovered they got sick if they strayed too far from Glass Beach.

Some couldn't take it, and killed themselves by drowning, or by deliberately walking away from the beach until they died, leaving inexplicable monster corpses, like dried-out driftwood.

Others couldn't take it, and went mad. They decided to become monsters inside and out, preying on humans.

The rest try to pretend they're human. They live quiet, normal, boring lives in town, relying on their Veiling to hide their strange behavior from others. They cling to their deceptions desperately, and the one thing that can threaten them are newly made psychics. Each storm brings with it the risk of danger, of troublemakers who can see through the veil and have to be dealt with.

Who Are the Monsters? Anyone who lives in town can be a monster (and since the monsters can survive outside town for some time, then it's possible that a returning nonresident is also a monster). Go through the list of GMCs suggested by the players and pick a few to be monsters in disguise. Be careful when picking relatives and close friends as monsters — you run the risk of undercutting the horror by having the monster trying to help the player characters in the first or second session. If you do make a parent or other close relative a monster, then have that character leave town before the storm, and return a few sessions later, *after* the player characters have been attacked by other monsters.

The players will inevitably suspect either Officer Smalls or Krief of being a monster. Listen to their speculations at the game table and undercut them (maybe neither man is a monster).

Not every monster needs be someone known to the player characters. It's a small town, but that doesn't mean they know everyone by name. For that matter, some monsters don't have human identities — they use their Veiling to stay invisible all the time. There could have been a monster living in a player character's room all this time, and it's only now, after the storm, that they can see it.

You don't need many monsters — three or four named monsters, plus a few secondary candidates in case the players follow an unexpected line of inquiry.

The cultists occupying Marlin House are *not* monsters.

Describing the Monsters: While these monsters aren't technically Creatures of Unremitting Horror,

MRS. WAINWRIGHT

She doesn't recall her old name, or who she was before the storm. She fills in her history from the books she reads, borrowing pasts from romantic heroines. Sometimes, she recalls that she came to this town with a man, and they were in love, until the storm opened her eyes – her eight eyes – and she saw him for what he really was. Saw him from the inside out. And then she grew claws, and made him the way she saw him.

She looks a little like a spider. A sea spider, all spindly legs and eyes. Her still-human head perched atop the insect body like an afterthought, four eyes jostling for space in each swollen, cracked eye socket.

Mrs. Wainwright doesn't like to leave the library – she's able to drain the will of regular library patrons, sucking out their emotions and turning them into grey husks. She's got half a dozen or so such minions, all retired or unemployed residents of the town, who visit the library daily. She uses these unfortunates as her messengers and agents, sending them out to fetch for her. She believes the outside world is full of treachery and pain, and her Aura Reading power makes her extremely sensitive to such suffering. When she does have to leave, she closes her eyes and uses her mind-controlled servants as guides to bring her close to her intended victims. She only allows herself to see outside the carefully curated walls of her library when it's absolutely necessary. She might, for example, allow herself to be guided blindly to a player character's home, and then open her eyes when she attacks.

Abilities: Aberrance 8, Athletics 6, Health 6, Scuffling 7

Hit Threshold: 5 (but see below)

Armor: +0

Awareness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifier: +1 claw, or no damage (webbing)

Aura Reading: When Mrs. Wainwright opens her eight eyes, she can see auras so clearly that she can perceive intent. She knows what you're going to do next, where you're going to go. That's why her Hit Threshold is so high – she's physically frail, but able to anticipate every move. Strong, painful auras blind

her – she can't look directly at someone in a state of high emotion, and her Hit Threshold drops to 2 if she can't see to dodge. She prefers to wrap her victims in webbing before cutting them open, so she doesn't have to look at them as they die.

Sticky Webbing: By spending 1 Aberrance, Mrs. Wainwright can secrete a sticky webbing from her mouth, made of chewed-up pages and bonemeal. She can use this to:

- Climb sheer walls
- Cover a book with webbing, making it sticky to the touch. By covering a book with fine, almost invisible webbing, she can turn it into a trap. If the player characters start investigating the history of the town, she'll pre-emptively coat with webbing several books on matters related to the storm, so she can catch and devour the meddling investigators.
- Catch and wrap a foe in combat. Treat this as a Scuffling attack that deals no damage.

Breaking free of Mrs. Wainwright's webbing requires an Athletics test (Difficulty 8). If a character fails the test, they can make up the difference by spending Health. (So, get a total of 5 on your Athletics test, and you can choose to rip yourself free by spending 3 Health.) Trapped characters cannot use Fleeing, and their Hit Thresholds drop to 2.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Reassurance: Old Mrs. Parvi has no idea why she followed you. The last thing she remembers is going to the library. She doesn't know how she ended up on the beach.

Photography: Hey, doesn't the woman in this photo look just like a young Mrs. Wainwright? Can't be her, though – this photo was taken in the 1940s.

Outdoor Survival: This stuff is like spiderweb, but... if it's a web, the spider that made it must be huge.

Medicine: The body in the library attic is mummified beneath thick layers of spiderweb. He's been gutted and sewn back together.

Fear Itself

they've got the same twisted, skinned-skull aesthetic. Emphasize their inhumanity: use animal and insect similes when describing how they move and scuttle. Make them disgustingly, disturbingly uncanny. The fly-waitress in the seafood restaurant who vomits acid on the leftovers. The mugger who grows knives like cuttlebones.

All the monsters have at least one psychic power, just like the player characters, and their descriptions should contain clues to their abilities. A monster with Aura Reading might have grotesquely oversized, iridescent eyes, or far too many eyes. One with the power of Medium might be followed by a crowd of ghostly shades. A Messenger might have absorbed an old-style

THE SANDTRACKER

When you're on holiday by the beach with small kids, sand gets everywhere. Even in places that make no sense. Sand in your underwear drawer. Sand in the microwave. Sand in your toothbrush.

Sand in your bed.

When your child cries out in the night, and you stumble half-asleep down the corridor to comfort him, your bare feet brush against sand on the floor, and you think "Hey, didn't I sweep that before going to bed?" But you don't recall the thought on waking the next morning.

And when they do the autopsy, they'll find sand in your throat.

The thing called the Sandtracker doesn't have a human identity. It stays permanently veiled, invisible to anyone without the psychic gifts needed to see it. By day, it roams the beaches or rests — it may be invisible, but it's still got a physical presence, and it's easier to move around a house when everyone's asleep. By night, it hunts. The Sandtracker possesses a heightened version of the Sensitivity power, allowing it to absorb emotional vibrations from objects. By night, it paws through people's belongings, looking for items with emotional resonance. It carries these prizes away to its lair — it's got caches of treasured personal items hidden throughout town. Children's toys, wedding rings, family photographs, heirlooms, and love letters, all stuffed inside crawlspaces or shoved behind loose bricks.

Sometimes, it finds a particularly delicious emotional resonance, and decides that it has to have the pure, uncut original. It finds the person whose psychic patina stains the object, and abducts them, forcing them to

recreate that emotional state over and over again. Of course, the primary emotion triggered by being held captive by a monstrous voyeuristic monster is terror, but the Sandtracker loves that feeling too. It's like a rich sauce that makes the other emotions taste better.

Physically, the Sandtracker resembles a huge, hairy ape-thing, its fur matted with wet sand. It has no facial features except a toothless, lipless mouth-orifice. Its hands are weirdly oversized, and covered in bristly growths more like the antennae of insects than hair.

Abilities: Aberrance 6, Athletics 8, Health 12, Scuffling 8

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: +1

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: +0

Damage Modifier: +1 (hairy hands)

Slasher Movement: By spending 1 Aberrance, the Sandtracker can appear somewhere out of sight. It can't suddenly be in your room, but it can be just outside in the hallway, and all you hear is the faint crunch of sand underfoot.

ALL THAT REMAINS

Notice: Hey, more sand.

Cop Talk: There's supposed to be a gang of housebreakers working the town. Personal effects go missing from vacation homes all the time.

Outdoor Survival: The body's been buried in the sand for months. Crabs have eaten most of the flesh, making identification impossible.

radio into its body, Bakelite dials and aerials sprouting from its back like spines.

Investigating Monsters: The characters' own Veiling abilities let them see who's a monster, but only if they concentrate and spend a point. That means the players can't just run around town unmasking everyone. They need to pick and choose their targets carefully, using other Investigative Abilities (like **Bullshit Detector**) to try to identify the monsters behind the veils.

Most monsters need to or choose to prey on humans. This predation may be psychic (draining emotions and ambition, prematurely aging and greying the victims, but not inflicting any obvious physical harm) or violently physical (serial-killing, people-eating monsters). The town's police may be in the thrall of a monster, or be monsters themselves, or have been paid to look the other way by the cult in Marlin House.

A story-packed miniseries like this one leaves little room for procedural investigation. One or two clues should be enough to identify a hidden monster.

The Monsters and the Player Characters: Most of the monsters are hostile toward the player characters, either out of self-defense ("*You'll give me away! You'll tell them what I am!*"), out of sheer malice ("*No one will miss you, no one will care when I eat your eyes*"), or out of some instinctive sense of competition — the fewer monsters in the town, the easier it is to hide. Some monsters may be more sympathetic or helpful to the player characters, either because they're all laboring under the same curse, or because they are relatives or friends of the characters. The first few monsters the PCs meet should be hostile; save sympathetic monsters for the mid-series twist.

THE HISTORY OF TOWN

There are at least four ways the investigators can learn the secret history of Glass Beach and discover more about the storms (the players' questionnaires may suggest other options). This investigation points the characters toward the resurgent cult at Marlin House.

- **The Library and Historical Society:** Digging into the town's public records.
- **Asking Questions:** Asking local residents about the town's weirdness.

- **The Lighthouse Lab:** The abandoned automated lighthouse near Glass Beach was later used as a weather research station.

- **Ann's Diary:** This Floating Clue is the journal of a young woman from the 1960s who was caught in a previous storm and underwent the same transformation as the player characters.

The Library and Historical Society:

- **Research** gets a list of previous storms, and an article from the town's small local newspaper about Professor Klingsor's work. Checking online finds that Professor Klingsor seems to have dropped out of sight a few months after starting his work. He was based in the old lighthouse near Glass Beach.

- **Photography** spots a few familiar faces in really old photographs.

- **History** pieces together some clues about Marlin House. The mansion was built in the 1920s by an eccentric artist named Leon Farrik, who brought scandal to the town, according to lurid accounts of orgies, occult rituals, and drug abuse among the guests at his home. Later in life, Farrik continued to summer in town every few years, until his death in 1957. He was cremated and his ashes scattered on Glass Beach. He had no children, so Marlin House was left to a foundation he set up to promote "philosophical and artistic endeavors."

Of course, any visit to the library might result in an encounter with Mrs. Wainwright.

Asking Questions:

- **Flattery:** Such a nice, well-spoken young person! What do you want to know about town, dear? I've lived here all my life...
- **Humanities:** There's a tradition or superstition in town that things are always unsettled after a storm. Everyone locks their doors at night, and keeps an eye out for strange behavior. The police patrol a little more often. The town lives on tourism — can't have anything scaring people away from Main Beach. It always passes after a few weeks. People stop noticing and forget.

Fear Itself

- **Streetwise:** The abandoned lighthouse is dangerous. Oh, it looks picturesque from the outside, but inside it's all rotten and wrecked. Don't go there.

Asking questions might attract the attention of lurking monsters.

The Lighthouse Lab: The old lighthouse on the headland near Glass Beach is automated. The doors to the inside of the lighthouse are locked and bolted; access to the lamp mechanism is via an external ladder. If the characters want to get inside, they'll need to break in (either by breaking the lock on the main door, or by climbing up the outside of the lighthouse and opening the trapdoor on the top level).

- **Trivia:** Hey, they've wrapped this lighthouse with wire. It's like a big Faraday cage.

Inside, they find a spooky, wrecked scientific laboratory. It's clear that this wasn't just a weather station — it looks like Professor Klingsor was doing all sorts of experiments on animals. There are old cages, dissection tables, strange electrical apparatuses. It looks like the place was abandoned hastily, even violently. It's partially flooded, forcing the characters to wade through stagnant, slimy water.

The secret truth is that Professor Klingsor was hired by the cult to investigate the storm. He inadvertently got transformed into a monster by the storm's energies, and turned on the cult. They took some of his research, then fled, leaving him to invisibly haunt the lighthouse. He's lurked in the ruins of his lab as a savage monster ever since.

- **Law:** Some old, waterlogged letters suggest that Klingsor's work was bankrolled by the Ferrik Trust — the same group that owns Marlin House.

- **Medicine or Trivia:** The experiments here involved brains in jars, and what look like those flash cards from *Ghostbusters* — the ones used to test for psychic ability.

- **Science or Mechanics:** Lots of the equipment here is missing or incomplete. It looks like some of it was looted or torn out of the walls.

- **Notice:** Those are bullet holes in the walls. The looters came *armed*, and then they ran away.

Research or Science on the lab files could also be a way for the investigators to learn about the connection between psychic powers and mutation into monsters, or the fact that monsters can't leave the town without getting sick and dying, or that experiments were also conducted at Marlin House. Calibrate the amount of information available here to the actions of the player characters — if they go here in episode 1 of your miniseries, all they find are a few Core Clues pointing them at other avenues of investigation. If they go here in episode 3 or 4, they get lots more information to fill gaps in the story they've already pieced together.

Ann's Diary: This document is a Floating Clue — have it appear wherever the player characters look. It might be found in the library, or hidden in an old suitcase in a crack in the rocks near Glass Beach, or in the lighthouse laboratory, or in the Sandtracker's hoard of stolen treasures.

The diary was written in 1968 by a young woman named Ann. She came to the town on vacation with her family, but reading between the lines with **Social Sciences** or **Bullshit Detector**, the characters can work out that she was pregnant, and the family moved here for a few months to hide the pregnancy and birth from their neighbors. The family had arranged with a charitable foundation, the Ferrik Trust, to have the child placed with an adoptive family as soon as it was born.

Ann was caught in a storm just like the one that the player characters experienced, and like them soon developed psychic powers. At first, she used her telepathic powers to torment her judgmental, overbearing family by revealing their secrets to one another, but she later discovered there were real monsters in town. One creature attacked her, and she survived only because her unborn child had its own telekinetic abilities. As the monster died, Ann read its mind and discovered that it had once been human.

Stumbling home, Ann met a representative from the Ferrik Trust for the first time (her father had handled all business with the charity). She sensed that the man knew about her abilities, and mistrusted him.

The diary ends with Ann standing on Glass Beach, trying to decide what to do next. The final entries are confused and surreal, with Ann talking about "storm catchers" and "visiting Briny Heaven."

Research on the Ferrik Trust points the characters at Marlin House.

THE PROFESSOR

He gnawed through the concrete and the bedrock to make himself a tunnel to the sea. He's more of an aquatic creature than a land-dweller now. His legs have fused together. A row of spikes, each one a bundle of nerve endings, sprouts from his back. His raw nerves are exposed; he feels everything. That's why he seeks the cold comfort of the empty ocean — there are fewer minds there to impinge on his consciousness.

Like a reflecting pool, his mind takes on the image of anything nearby.

The monster that was Professor Klingsor still haunts the ruins of his wrecked laboratory. He's painfully telepathic, unable to *not* read the thoughts and emotions of those around him. There's almost nothing left of the man himself — if you're scared, he's scared, and when he's scared, he fights. On land, he's slow and clumsy (but not *that* slow or clumsy — he's still capable of surprising bursts of speed). In the water, he's inhumanly fast and agile.

The Professor knows about the cult and its connection with the storm, but is unable to articulate it in most circumstances. If the player characters are able to overcome their own fears and approach him peacefully, he can telepathically implant knowledge in their minds.

Abilities: Aberrance 8, Athletics 12, Health 8, Scuffling 8

Hit Threshold: 5 (in water), 3 (on land)

Armor: +0

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +2 (in water), -2 (on land)

Damage Modifier: +0 (claws)

Drowner: If the Professor injures a character, he can spend 1 point of Aberrance to telepathically implant the desire to drown in the mind of his victim. The injured character needs to spend 2 points of Stability every round (or be restrained), or else dive into the nearest body of water and try to drown. A 2-point Shrink spend can break the victim out of the compulsion; the desire subsides naturally after a few minutes.

Telepath: The Professor's mind is almost entirely determined by the thoughts of those around him. He can't think for himself any more — he's an unwilling telepathic gestalt. **Reassurance** and **Shrink** spends can calm the Professor down and allow the player characters to question him - a character who goes alone into the lighthouse doesn't need to spend. He doesn't have a mouth that can make intelligible words any more, but he can implant knowledge in the minds of others. These psychic implants are stained with the Professor's own experiences and emotions — he doesn't tell the player characters what he was doing in the lab, he makes them relive it. The implants also carry with them the drowning impulse described above, so a character who questions the Professor must flee the lighthouse immediately afterward or commit suicide.

THE LOST CHILD

Physically, he's diminutive — a malformed creature scarcely bigger than an infant, kept in an old wheelchair that he moves with Telekinesis. (His Veiling power affects him but not the chair, so it looks like it's moving on its own to most people.) He hasn't really aged in the fifty years since his birth, although his mind is that of an adult. The Ferrik cult initially tried to make him into a Medium to recontact Ferrik's soul and open the way to the Outer Dark; when that failed, they made him into a guardian for Marlin

House. They call him Caliban when they refer to him at all.

Abilities: Aberrance 16, Athletics 4, Health 12, Scuffling 4, Telekinesis 16

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: +0

Awareness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: -2

Damage Modifier: +1 (telekinetically manipulated knife)

Fear Itself

If Ann (or her child) are still around town, either in disguise as ordinary people, or as invisible monsters like the Sandtracker or the Professor, then the diary provides a 3-point pool that can be spent on any Interpersonal Ability. (**Intimidation:** I'll burn this book if you don't tell me what's going on. **Flattery:** I've read your diary. You were so brave. Be brave again. Help us.)

If the Ferrik cult succeeded in adopting Ann's child, then the unfortunate monster might show up as the cult's invisible monster, the guardian of Marlin House. The creature never knew it was born human.

THE CULT

The Ferrik Trust is a cover for a cell of Esoterrorists. In the full mythos (described in *The Esoterrorists 2nd Edition* rulebook, which is fully compatible with *Fear Itself*), the Esoterrorists plot to corrode the Membrane between our reality and the Outer Dark by spreading fear, madness, and uncertainty. They exploit our existing fears and anxieties, using these cracks in our collective psyche to weaken humanity's spirit and open the way for their monstrous allies to invade. If *Glass Beach Summer* was an *Esoterrorists* scenario, then the cult would be spreading rumors about crime waves and gangs of feral youths attacking tourists, while simultaneously cultivating a poisonous nostalgia about the good old days when everything was clear and simple. The storm would be the result of their machinations, an ongoing breach in the Membrane that grows worse as the town falls into madness and paranoia.

However, in a short *Fear Itself* miniseries, you're unlikely to have time to delve into the subtleties of Esoterrorism, while also juggling psychic monsters and half a dozen personal stories. For simplicity's sake, treat the cult as a mysterious occult group who know about the storm and want to use it to gain psychic powers themselves, without turning into monsters.

The cult consists of a half dozen or so members. The leader of the cult is **Diane Firth**, an old woman who was Leon Ferrik's chief acolyte. She wants to obtain the psychic power to become a Medium and contact the ghost of her late teacher and lover, whose ashes were scattered on Glass Beach. To this end, she funded Professor Klingsor's research into the storm, and believes that she has found a way to capture and use the storm's psychic energy. In the attic of Marlin House is an apparatus, similar to the machinery in

the lighthouse, designed to catch and channel the storm's power into several glass caskets. When the storm struck, Firth and her chosen acolytes locked themselves inside the caskets and waited to be transformed, but the player characters got hit by the changes instead.

It could be years before there's another storm, and Firth cannot wait that long. Her backup plan is to find those recently affected by the storm and put *them* into the machine, transferring their powers into her. She believes that if she can find the newly made psychics before they become monsters, she can rip their abilities out of them.

Cult Members: In addition to Diane Firth, the cult has another three or four members stationed at Marlin House. Anyone else in town (anyone non-monstrous) might be working for the cult. Obvious candidates are the police or local government, but it's possible that some relative or friend of a player character is a secret cultist, especially if you've foreshadowed this ("*Remember you said your character's father is a painter? There's one of his paintings on the wall of this room in Marlin House...*").

The Cult and the Monsters: According to Ferrik's esoteric beliefs, the monsters are the result of an unprepared mind coming into contact with cosmic power. If your soul is unprepared, if you're still dominated by earthly concerns, you'll fall short of transcendence and be hideously warped. The cult see the monsters as dangerous failures, as cautionary examples. If the monsters get in their way, they'll try to kill them.

Marlin House: The house is surrounded with an electric fence, similar to the cage around the abandoned lighthouse. This fence blocks the monsters in town from trespassing. The fence is independently powered by a small diesel generator on the grounds; if the investigators sabotage this generator, the monsters could storm the house.

Meeting Firth: Firth may position herself as a friend to the player characters, promising to protect them from the monsters and relieve them of the burden of their powers. If that fails, then she'll try kidnapping the investigators at gunpoint, or forcing them to come to Marlin House by kidnapping their loved ones. As far as Firth is concerned, the investigators are stealing little urchins who stole her destiny, stole her keys to cosmic

power. She's been working on recontacting her beloved Leon Ferrik for more than fifty years — how *dare* some kids meddle with her great work?

Bullshit Detector sees through Firth's claim that she doesn't have any motive beyond saving the player characters from the curse of their psychic abilities.

A character with **Medium** could try contacting the spirit of Leon Ferrik and using that connection to manipulate Firth.

The Machine: There's at least one *fewer* slot in the machine than there are player characters. So, if you have three players, then the machine has three caskets, and one is reserved for Diane Firth as the receptacle for the transferred powers. Firth claims that she's able to contain the powers and won't be transformed into a monster — and in any event, she says she's willing to assume the risk, as long as it saves the player characters.

One player character must wait for a second activation of the machine.

Activating the machine causes agonizing pain to the people inside it. The player characters in the caskets take +1 damage for each point of psychic power drained from them. So, a character who loses 3 points of psychic power would take 3d6+3 damage — likely, a lethal injury. However, if the process is interrupted, then Firth is transformed into a monster and attacks.

EPISODE OUTLINES

Assuming four episodes, the miniseries might look something like this. This is just a sketch at the start of a campaign; player actions and the luck of the dice can send the story off in unexpected directions.

Episode 1: The player characters arrange a beach party on Glass Beach. For each player character, run one or two directed interpersonal scenes setting up backstory and conflicts. Emphasize the characters'

Removing the Cult

Ferrik's cult is a compromise between the needs of a horror story and the needs of an investigative game. If you're more interested in horror than puzzles, consider removing it.

This point is worth delving into in a little detail. Horror stories don't need to explain everything, and don't need to give the protagonists the ability to determine their fates or affect the outcome. A story cannot be criticized for being "unfair" or not offering its protagonists enough choices.

In a roleplaying game, however, the players can delve into any topic that interests them. They can keep digging into the history of the town, or the storm. Some players need to feel like they're masters of their own fate to some degree, that their actions have consequences, and that they're not passive victims of the GM's horrific story. They want to feel like they accomplished something through their mental effort and problem-solving, instead of "just" playing their characters.

Other players (or the same players in different moods) are less interested in the GM's carefully constructed backstory and find their own character's story much more compelling. Solving the mystery is a sideshow compared to their personal horror.

In *Glass Beach Summer*, the cult is a literal plot device. They have a machine that can bring the miniseries to an end. If your players are into solving mysteries and overcoming problems, then the cult is a solution they can uncover (a horribly flawed solution, but it's a horror game, so it's OK to have no good choices, only a selection of bad ones).

However, if your players really get into their characters' personal stories, if they're having cathartic fun playing a bunch of teenagers suddenly thrust into a weird, horrific situation, and you think you can bring the miniseries to a satisfying, dramatic end without the cult (say, some of the player characters embrace their destiny as monsters, and the others fight back, and you end up with a bloody psychic battle royale between the player characters), then don't include it.

Glass Beach Summer is a better horror *story* if it's the aftermath of a horrific, inexplicable, and inevitable event. If the characters are cursed by, effectively, a random occurrence, if there's no reason behind the storm and no way to escape its effects, that's horrifying. It's a better horror *game* if there's a way for sufficiently clever and motivated players to escape their fate. You'll need to find your own balance between the two poles, based on your own tastes and those of your players. There's no wrong way to play *Fear Itself* as long as it's fun for your group, but your fun may not be the same as that of another group.

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powerlessness and lack of control (*"I don't care if all your friends are going to the party, young lady! My house, my rules."*)

Mention the lighthouse as background detail.

The storm hits during the beach party, trapping the characters in the cove overnight. They gain psychic powers in the storm.

More interpersonal scenes, mirroring the previous ones, only now the characters have an unexpected edge in their psychic abilities. (*"I can read your mind, Dad. Your house, your rules, you said... only it's not your house, is it? I know how much money you've borrowed from the bank... does Mom know? Oh, I can tell – she doesn't know. Should I tell her?"*)

The episode ends with an encounter with the Sandtracker.

Episode 2: More monster encounters – the Sandtracker attacks one or more player characters once it discovers they have psychic powers.

The characters defeat the Sandtracker and find Ann's diary in its lair. Investigating the diary leads them to the library and an encounter with Mrs. Wainwright. Depending on the player characters' actions, they may be able to question Wainwright.

Clues in the library point them at the lighthouse.

Episode 3: They visit the lighthouse, and escape with more information about the Ferrik cult at Marlin House.

Mrs. Wainwright (or another monster) stalks the player characters, but is killed by agents of the cult.

Diane Firth contacts the characters and offers a cure.

Episode 4: The player characters debate whether or not to take Firth's offer.

More interpersonal scenes, resolving backstories and personal plot arcs.

Investigating Marlin House reveals that the cult's aims are more sinister than they first appeared. The characters encounter the Lost Child.

Firth tries to force some of the characters to undergo the power transfer procedure. The other characters escape and bring down the fence, allowing monsters to storm the grounds. In the chaos, Firth becomes a monster and has to be killed by the player characters. There's mass unseen carnage among the town's monster population, leaving the player characters as the only survivors.

By the end, some of the characters have apparently lost their powers to the now-dead Firth, but others are doomed to continue transforming into monsters. What do they do now that summer's over?



CHAPTER 13: CAMPAIGNS

Gamer Jargon 101: the term “campaign” comes originally from the wargaming hobby. It borrows both from military terminology, referring to a series of battles in pursuit of a greater objective, and from the idea of a “campaign season,” when going to war was feasible. Armies marched and fought in the spring and summer before entrenching for the winter months; college wargaming clubs played their series of linked battles during term time, and a few stalwarts might still be available for an extra summer campaign.

While tabletop roleplaying is now more likely to borrow terminology from theater and scriptwriting, the concept of the campaign remains lodged in our collective psyche. A campaign is played with a goal or premise in mind, but it’s open-ended — there’s no set number of sessions for a campaign. Some last for only a few weeks; others go on for years, or even decades.

Fear Itself is about ordinary people confronting the supernatural. Ordinary people, as a rule¹, don’t actively seek out horrors. Professional monster hunters and FBI agents aren’t ordinary people. (Check out *The Esoterrorists* for a game where the player characters are coolly competent professionals.) One-shots and miniseries work great within this constraint — it’s perfectly plausible for a group of people to have a single, harrowing encounter with the supernatural.

The first challenge when planning a *Fear Itself* campaign is working out why they come back. Why are these people confronted with the horrors of the Outer Dark again and again?

CAMPAIGN PREMISE

A campaign premise sums up why the characters are engaged in an ongoing struggle with the supernatural, and gives the players an idea of the sort of characters they might play. Discuss potential premises with your players before starting the game; everyone should have a chance to contribute ideas until you find a structure that everyone’s happy with. Some examples of premises:

- You’re a group of close friends. You all had a friend in common — Eva, but you all knew her by her preferred nickname of Dicey. She was fascinated by the occult. Someone — or something — murdered her. The police have blamed her ex-boyfriend Rob, but you’re sure he’s innocent. The answer may be in the room full of journals, printouts, notes, and grimoires that Eva left behind. You’ve got to delve into her research and find out who killed her to clear Rob’s name.
- You’ve all been targeted by an incomprehensible supernatural entity, a Mystery Man (p. 82), and forced to play in a cryptic series of

¹ Well, guideline. As long as your characters are suitably amateurish, innocent, and unprepared for the horror, you can have a campaign where ordinary people seek out the supernatural. A group of ghost hunters, a team of priests who investigate claims of miraculous or demonic activity, or a neighborhood watch group in a city on the edge of the Outer Dark all work great as *Fear Itself* campaign premises.

challenges called the "Ocean Game." The horror intrudes on your everyday lives; there's no way to escape it.

- Following on from *The Circle* adventure (p. 107), you're going to find out who's behind the thaumazine drug and the occult torture rituals you discovered at the farm.
- Each of you had your own encounter with the supernatural that nearly shattered your mind. Now, you're all part of the same therapy group. One of you starts having precognitive nightmares about more monster attacks. Knowing that the authorities won't believe you, it's up to you to act on these premonitions and take revenge on the supernatural.
- You're all members of the same family, although most of you are estranged from or even unaware of your relatives. The family is cursed with the duty to battle the Outer Dark. Now, as the walls between dimensions grow thin, the monsters start targeting your bloodline. You have no choice but to reconnect with your relatives and take up your ancestral duty, no matter how unprepared you are.

CHARACTER CREATION

Campaigns use the standard character generation rules in Chapter 2.

Give players a free hand when designing their characters, as long as they keep to the premise. If a player picks an unexpected set of Investigative Abilities, treat that choice as a signal about what the player wants to see in the campaign. For example, a player who picks lots of **History**, **Research**, and **Humanities** expects lots of scenes of digging through libraries, uncovering old journals, and solving mysteries through deduction and careful analysis. A player who invests plenty of points in **Athletics**, **Scuffling**, and **Shooting** clearly anticipates plenty of fight scenes. (Guess which player character is going to die first...)

CAMPAIGN RISK FACTORS

Campaign Risk Factors need to bring the players back to the horror again and again. They shouldn't be tied to

any single situation, but are factors that can be invoked repeatedly to justify the self-destructive foolhardiness or self-sacrificing heroism required of horror protagonists.

DRIVES

Drives are personality traits that compel characters to get involved in mysteries. They could be the best part of the character, the highest expression of their morals, or they could equally be fatal personality flaws that will ultimately destroy them. What's important is that they cannot be ignored — they push the character into action.

CURIOUS

When confronted by a mystery, you can't help but investigate. Damn the risks, there's something going on here, and you're going to figure it out! You may be a dedicated scientist, envisioning the fame and glory that will be yours when you publish this in your scientific paper. Or you might simply be a layperson determined to turn every question mark into a period. Either way, you delve heedlessly down into darkened basements, open dusty coffins, and recite the spidery incantations written on crumbling manuscripts.

DEBT

If it were up to you, you'd stay home. You don't want to be out here tonight, freezing your ass off in the icy rain, waiting for some snaggle-toothed monster made of garbage and dead babies to show up. But one of your pals once saved your life, and you've got to repay the favor.

DUTY

You have a responsibility to step in and save people. It might be a professional obligation if you're a police officer, paramedic, soldier, or doctor, or it might be a responsibility you've chosen to shoulder yourself. Either way, you can't turn aside or look away. This is on you.

FATED

You're inextricably entwined with the forces of the Outer Dark. You will never return to a normal life; you have been marked by the supernatural. Knowing that you're cursed, you choose to fight back against the monsters rather than succumb to despair. You're almost certainly doomed, but maybe you can save some other people before they get you.

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GREEDY

Let others have their kinks and quirks. You're a straightforward, honest fellow, who seeks that which man has sought for all eternity. Material wealth. Money. Gold. All the toys and status that redound to the man gifted with a fat bank account. Whether you're living in threadbare squalor or swanning about a chic penthouse, you're still looking for that big, final score. (If you got it, you'd be happy for a day before you upped your ambitions and started looking for a really, really big score. But so what?)

You'll take any risk if there's a chance of significant profit in it.

GUNG HO

Some men were born to be trod upon. You were born to be the treader. You're a big, bad muscle machine — or intend to become one. Ever since you were a kid, the sight of a shiny weapon made you salivate. A weak society ruled by wusses has kept you down until now, depriving you of opportunities to crush your enemies beneath your ever-eager boot heels. Maybe you were turned down for the police academy after you failed the psych evaluation, on account of your enthusiastically expressed violent fantasies. Or even the army. What kind of weak-kneed, politically correct military turns down a guy because he dreams of killing, anyhow?

You react to danger, especially to reports of supernatural monsters, with glee. This is what you were put on this earth for. To shoot questions and ask answers first. Wait a minute...

Anyhow, you'll step into any situation that might relieve the itch on your trigger finger.

HAUNTED

You can't rest, not when you know the monsters are out there. You've tried — God knows, you've tried — but you can't lie to yourself. What happened to you was real. There are monsters out there, in the dark places. How can you turn away, knowing that other people might suffer like you've suffered? You have to act. You couldn't live with yourself if you didn't.

HORRIFIC FASCINATION

You're drawn to the supernatural, to the Outer Dark. It fascinates you. It attracts you.

You might dress up your fascination as scientific curiosity, or a desire for the truth, or some other drive, but really, it's deeper than that. Something in you wants to leap into that void, to see how deep the darkness goes. All your adventures are dancing on the edge of the abyss, looking into it, and drawing back a little less each time.

MYSTERIOUS PAST

Something happened to you, something you cannot wholly understand or remember. It might have been a single weird event — a period of missing time, a tragedy like a murdered family member, a single encounter with the supernatural — or it may have consumed your past life. Maybe you're an amnesiac, or maybe you're haunted by nightmares. Delving into the supernatural is your only way to understand yourself.

PROTECTIVE

Thoughts of your own safety mean little to you when others are at risk. You may tell yourself that you care only for yourself and your immediate friends, but when the chips are down, you'll leap into the fire for any deserving person in need of help. You won't sacrifice your life pointlessly, but may be prone to overestimate your capacity to effect needed rescues.

SKEPTICAL

A healthy sense of disbelief can turn fatal in a world where things really do go bump in the night. You're a card-carrying debunking rationalist, constitutionally incapable of believing in the supernatural. Despite your ferocious defense of the scientific method and deduction from available facts, no amount of firsthand evidence can sway you to accept the reality of the Outer Dark. When faced with an Unremitting Horror, you rush toward it, hoping to find the wires, the latex prosthetics, and the hidden PA system. Even when you admit that one incident might have been genuinely supernatural, that doesn't stop you from trying to debunk subsequent manifestations. Even if 0.00001% of cases are genuine, that doesn't mean that the blood corpse charging toward you right now is anything other than a man in a rubber suit. Why, you can practically see the zippe... AGGHH!!

THRILL-SEEKING

Danger is your middle name. If you're a person of means and experience, you've done it all: skydiving,

BASE jumping, scuba diving in shark-infested waters... If you're young and without resources, you settle for the time-honored dangers of teenage life, from elevator riding to drag racing.

Either way, the possibility of imminent death gives you an adrenaline rush more satisfying than any artificial chemical. Dank caverns? Monsters? Bring 'em on, baby.

TRUTH-SEEKING

The truth is out there, as a wise man once said. You're determined to drag the creatures of darkness into the light, to understand what's really going on. It's more than curiosity — you're on a quest to discover the truth. This might be a purely personal mission, or you may be intent on finding proof that the supernatural exists, proof that society at large cannot ignore.

UNLUCKY

Why does this always happen to you? It's gone way beyond coincidence! You've got the weirdest luck imaginable. If your car breaks down, it'll be outside a haunted house. If you go to a bar, some drunk guy will tell you a story about how he's being pursued by talking hornets with devil voices. If you try buying a doll for your niece, it'll turn out to be a murderous homunculus. You're a weirdness magnet, and you've got to find a way to live with that.

VENGEFUL

When someone hurts you or your loved ones, you can't rest until the wrongdoers receive their comeuppance. "Hurt" can mean genuine injury, or just distress, embarrassment, or insult. In fact, any kind of fight works for you, so long as you can feel the fuel of righteous indignation coursing through your veins. You may wage

Advancement and Experience

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

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

Optionally, award bonus points for especially memorable roleplaying performances, clever deductions, or imaginative uses of Investigative spends. One option is to have a bowl of tokens (one per player) in the middle of the table, and encourage the players to award these tokens to other players for entertaining play. One token can be cashed in for one build point (or, in dire straits, for a 2-point refresh of any General Ability).

it with fists or at a distance, through sabotage and manipulation, but either way, you forget or downgrade the risks you face as you pursue your campaign of retribution. Hot, cold — revenge is a dish you're ready to serve at any time, at any cost.

GOALS

Deciding on a goal is part of standard character creation in any *Fear Itself* game, regardless of length. Even the shortlived player characters of a one-shot game should pick a goal. In a short game, though, the characters' goals are more likely to be a method of characterization or, at most, a frame for the horrific meat of the actual mystery. If your character's goal is to win the heart of the most popular girl in school, then that might just tell the group that your character is romantic and possibly a little clueless or overly ambitious. The popular girl might show up in the opening scene, and get mentioned in the epilogue (*"With your newfound confidence after defeating the werewolf, Bob asks Sharon for a date"*) — assuming the poor girl isn't reduced to a bloody plot device (*"Bob, you hear someone screaming for help from the basement. You recognize the voice — it's Sharon!"*)

Goals are much more important in an open-ended campaign, as players have time and scope to actually accomplish their aims.

A good goal is one that requires definite action on your part to accomplish it. "Protect my family" isn't a valid goal unless something is actively threatening your family. "Come to terms with a horrific experience in my past" can work if there's a clear action you can take to begin the healing process.

Unlike drives, goals can and should change over the course of a campaign. "Win the heart of the most popular girl in school" might become "Keep both Sharon and our relationship alive, now that she's been

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targeted by the Mystery Man too." Goals don't have to relate directly to the mystery of the week ("Get ready for my wedding to Sharon"), although a cruel GM may cross the streams ("*The priest screams 'til death to you part!' and swings the knife again. More tentacles grow from his eyes. What do you do?'*")

When deciding on your goal, try building it out into a personal arc. Jot down two or three ideas for scenes or events that might help move your character toward the goal.

OTHER RISK FACTORS

The Spiral of Misery (p. 134) and Questionnaires (p. 136) also work well in campaigns. When designing a questionnaire, remember that a campaign is almost certain to have a wider scope than a miniseries. Instead of everything happening in one small town or region, a campaign might involve globetrotting, or at least cover a much larger area.

DESIGNING A CAMPAIGN

Campaigns are gleefully, gloriously unpredictable. With no time limit or fixed ending, you can explore consequences and incorporate the players' unexpected plans and twists. It's impossible to design a whole campaign from beginning to end — the most you can do is plan the starting point and the first few sessions, and have some notes and ideas on where it might go. You might even have a vision for how the campaign will end, but the chances of that precise ending actually coming to pass are vanishingly small. Campaigns are about the journey more than the destination.

There's considerable similarity between designing a campaign and writing a series bible or treatment for a television series. In both cases, the writer's goal is to describe the premise and style of the show, sketch out a few key characters, describe some potential episodes, and lay the groundwork for a cycle of stories that could last for years.

EPISODIC VS. ONGOING

Is your campaign episodic or ongoing? Is each game session a self-contained "mystery of the week" or is it all one big mystery that continues on from week to week?

Both styles of campaign work, and both have their merits and drawbacks.

EPISODIC

An episodic campaign can often be more satisfying on a week-to-week basis, as each session is a self-contained whole. The players solve a mystery each week, and you don't need to worry too much about issues of continuity or remembering exactly what happened three months ago. Episodic play tends to have a greater variety of monsters, mysteries, and situations ("*This week we're hunting Torture Dogs in Miami; next week it's a Wastelander in Nevada*"). Episodic campaigns are also much better at handling players whose attendance at the game is unpredictable — it's easier to say "Bob isn't coming with us on this case" than it is to say "OK, even though Bob's trapped in the cellar with you, his player isn't here this week, so he, er, goes catatonic from stress."

The downside of an episodic campaign is that it can end up seemingly inconsequential. It's a series of one-shots, so the mystery of the week is unlikely to be especially complex or deep, and the monster of the week may only get a few minutes onstage before it's time to defeat it and move on. Episodic campaigns also have less space to further the player characters' personal arcs and goals.

Keep an episodic game fresh by varying the format — run the occasional two-part adventure, or have a session that's all about the player characters' goals, as opposed to supernatural monsters.

Consider jumping straight into an episodic game. Instead of spending the first session getting the gang together, start with the player characters already established in whatever role they have that gives them regular plot hooks (detective agency, friends of a psychic, amateur ghost hunters, etc. — see "Plot Dispensers," p. 161). Establish the routine of the campaign early on, and then do "How we all met" as a flashback later on.

ONGOING

An ongoing campaign is like a novel, with each game session covering a chapter. Ideally, each session ends at a natural break point or a cliffhanger, but each week builds on the events of the previous ones. Investigations can last for weeks before the players finally crack the mystery. Ongoing campaigns allow for sprawling, complex mysteries, detailed characterization, and have more room to explore the player characters' personal goals.

The downside of an episodic campaign is that it's unwieldy. Unless the GM pays attention to pacing, the whole game can become a mushy, shapeless monstrosity of a horror-tinged soap opera.

To keep an ongoing game on track, start each session with a summary of last week's action. Highlight important GM characters and plot elements. Encourage the players to restate or reconsider their characters' goals regularly, so they remember what they're striving to accomplish beyond mere survival.

MIXED

In practice, no campaign is wholly episodic or entirely ongoing. An episodic campaign will have recurring bad guys or continuing plot elements (a "mythology") outside the player characters; an ongoing campaign will have subplots and stories that fit neatly into one session. Nonetheless, knowing the sort of campaign you want is a necessary step in planning for it.

PLOT DISPENSERS

A *Fear Itself* mystery begins with an investigative trigger (p. 56) that starts the player characters on the trail of the mystery. In a campaign, especially an episodic one, it can be burdensome to have the players happen across each new investigative trigger by chance. It strains credibility to say that this week, Bob's aunt is abducted by a cult of killer clowns, when last week Sharon happened to inherit a cursed house, and next week everyone's going camping on a lost Civil War battleground haunted by the shades of deserters.

Instead, build a plot dispenser into your premise. A plot dispenser is a reusable way of starting an investigation. If the player characters are running a detective agency, the plot dispenser is the front door — each week, a new client walks through it and brings them a new case. Many psychic powers work as plot dispensers; each week, one character dreams about a horrible event that's about to happen, and the challenge each session is to prevent the vision from coming to pass.

Plot dispensers are less important in an ongoing campaign, where the aim is to have a single lengthy investigation that follows on from an investigative trigger. Still, you may wish to have some way of giving new leads or mysteries to the player characters if they're hesitant to follow their existing avenues of investigation.

FACTIONS FOLLOW AGENDAS, AGENDAS BREED TRIGGERS

Campaign-long mysteries aren't static. Often, the players are pitted against one or more sinister groups who are pursuing their own villainous schemes. Over the course of the investigation, the players learn who these rival factions are and what they want, while the villains continue to advance their schemes.

Classic factions include: cults (who may be small and secretive, vast and powerful, or mostly destroyed but with a malignant legacy), criminal organizations, eccentric wealthy occultists, alien or demonic invaders masquerading as humans, mysterious government or military-industrial complex conspiracies, and greedy corporations. In general, factions should be mostly run by humans; it diminishes the alien nature of the Outer Dark if all the monsters are schemers with agendas. Single powerful entities can be treated as factions in their own right — an Ovvashi (p. 84) and its circle of clients, or a Cuckoo Mother (p. 94) and her children, or a Mystery Man (p. 82) on its own could all be seen as factions in a campaign.

For each faction, note down their ultimate goal, a few steps they need to take to achieve that goal, and ways those steps might be investigative triggers for the player characters. At this stage, all you're doing is planning potential ways the faction might be investigated. Not all of these triggers will get pulled, so don't worry if some are contradictory. The important thing is to avoid a hermetically sealed conspiracy, where the bad guys can carry out their plans without ever being discovered by the player characters or interacting with the rest of the campaign.

The player characters might equally uncover a mystery relating to a step the faction has already taken. A secret military base where the government is breeding monsters is spooky, but an *abandoned* secret military base from the '60s where the government *was* breeding monsters *until it all went horribly wrong* is even scarier.

Take the Ferrik Trust cult in *Glass Beach Summer* (p. 141). This cult's ultimate goal is to achieve cosmic power by channeling the mysterious psychic storms that sometimes blow in from the ocean over Glass Beach. The steps they need to achieve this goal are:

- Scientifically investigate the storms
- Develop a way of harnessing the storm's psychic gifts

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- (Cover up their investigations)
- (Capture those already transformed by the storm and harvest their psychic powers)
- (Make contact with the ghost of Leon Ferrik, the cult's founder)
- (Resurrect Ferrik in some form)
- Transform into psychically potent Creatures of Unremitting Horror
- Achieve transcendence

(Goals in brackets aren't necessary for them to achieve their ultimate goal, but still further the aims of the faction, or are fallback positions if the previous step failed.)

Some ways that the player characters might interfere or be affected by this agenda:

- Scientifically investigate the storms
 - o Discover the ruins of the lab
 - o Get hired to carry out weird psychic experiments
 - o Experiment goes wrong, creates a monster
- Develop a way of harnessing the storm's psychic gifts
 - o Again, experiment goes wrong, creates monster
 - o Player character/Source of Stability/other innocent gets used as test subject
- (Cover up their investigations)
 - o Threatened witness runs to the player characters for help
 - o GMC turns out to be former cult member on the run
 - o Serial killer targeting psychics — killing fake ones as collateral damage/cover in hunt for real ones
- (Capture those already transformed by the storm and harvest their psychic powers)
 - o PCs discover ruins of asylum/prison for psychic monsters
 - o Psychic player character/Source of Stability kidnapped
 - o PCs hired to investigate rumors of psychic ability — after each case, subject of investigation vanishes mysteriously. PCs are being used by cult to find targets.
- Make contact with the ghost of Leon Ferrik, the cult's founder
 - o Other ghosts (dead PCs, dead Sources of Stability) awoken as side effect of experiments
 - o Ferrik has reincarnated as a player character

- (Resurrect Ferrik in some form)
 - o Cult decides player character is ideal vessel for Ferrik's consciousness
 - o They call Ferrik back with a psychic beacon that the player characters see in their dreams
 - o Something else comes back/Ferrik comes back wrong
- Transform into psychically potent Creatures of Unremitting Horror
 - o Transformation requires big ritual, lots of sacrifices
 - o Sinister third party hijacks transformation
- Achieve transcendence
 - o Triggers apocalypse

Factions are mysteries with teeth and claws: the player characters can only stop the faction's plans by investigating them, but that investigation results in immediate danger.

Factions offer a flexible way of planning a campaign. Instead of trying to predict plot twists and scenes six months in advance, populate your campaign with competing factions and see what plots develop organically.

FIND MUNDANITY IN THE SUPPORTING CAST

In a lengthy campaign, you've time to develop a solid supporting cast. You don't need a huge cast of GMCs — concentrate on a few strong characters, perhaps two or three per player character. Sources of Stability, key allies and rivals, mundane tormentors like bosses or coworkers. Your players will suggest most of these characters in their backstories.

Populate your supporting cast with compelling but ordinary people. Avoid the temptation to connect them to your factions or other mysteries. Give them problems, needs, addictions, dark secrets, hidden passions, but don't make any of them supernatural. *Fear Itself's* brand of horror requires ordinary people. It needs a baseline of normality to measure against the horror. Over the course of a campaign, the player characters inevitably see too much and experience too much to act as that baseline. It's hard for the characters (and the players) to remember that not every week contains yet another Creature of Unremitting Horror. Therefore, use the supporting cast to remind the players of ordinary life. Your supporting cast are the ones who complain

about the player characters' slipping grades, who chew them out when they miss work again, who worry about overloaded credit cards spent on ammunition, silver, and rare books. They're the ones who ask the player characters to babysit on the night of the full moon. And they're the ones who hold the player characters when it's all too much.

Similarly, don't kill off members of your supporting cast too avidly. Use disposable second-order GMCs as monster fodder — the serial-killing Skinner murders your aunt's neighbor across the hall, not your aunt. (Save killing supporting cast members for climactic sessions and sweeps week.)

RUNNING A CAMPAIGN

The advice on running individual horror scenarios (p. 105) applies equally in campaigns.

HOLD IDEAS LIGHTLY

Anticipate what's going to happen not only in the next game session, but two or three sessions to come. Have an idea in your head of how the rest of the campaign is going to play out from this point on. But hold these ideas lightly, and be ready to discard them if the players choose an unexpected avenue of investigation.

The mental prepwork you've done won't be wasted — you'll almost always be able to reuse ideas, or bend the campaign back toward what you had planned. (If you expected the players to head into the cursed desert next week, and instead they buy a boat and go looking for sea monsters, then put the desert aside for now — but when they come back to shore, the desert will be waiting.)

In practice, you'll correctly anticipate what the players will do nine times out of ten¹, and the one time they do something unexpected, it'll be way better and more entertaining than what you had planned, so run with it.

SURPRISE YOURSELF

The rigorous clue-finding approach of GUMSHOE can sometimes make GMs feel that everything needs to be precisely planned and reasoned, that everything has to fit into the mystery. While that's true to a degree in one-shots or miniseries, there's more scope for odd tangents in a campaign.

So, feel free to surprise yourself. Throw in weird events, mysterious encounters, cryptic visions, and other horrific strangeness, even if you have no idea what it means at the time. Give in to your imp of the perverse once in a while. If you've got to scramble to work out why the dying man said "*The fish is speaking*" ahead of the players, you'll discover unexpected connections between elements of your backstory.

You can also use directed scenes to get the players to surprise you. Something as simple as "*You open the casket, and inside is something shocking and horrific, something you immediately recognize. What is it?*" works perfectly. Throw unexpected grit into the cold, perfectly aligned gears of your plot once in a while.

KEEP PLAYERS OFF-BALANCE

In a long-running campaign, look for ways to keep the game fresh². Change things up once in a while — run a game session where one player plays her normal character, and everyone else plays the GMCs connected to her. Do a mystery that deluges the players in handouts. Run a session where there's a tactical map and the player characters need to storm a haunted house. Hold a game session where the player characters go to dinner, and cook dinner for your players so they eat at the same time as the characters. Break the routine, so the players never know quite what each game session will be like.

¹ More like seven times out of ten, but at least one of those unpredictable moments will involve random unprompted arson.

² Roleplaying campaign tips take half their cues from scriptwriting and directing, and the rest from relationship advice columns.



**CHAPTER 14:
THE DISPATCHERS**

And welcome back. It's 3.36AM, and you're with Jack Scratch. Let's see what's on the dial tonight.

static

"... is Charlie 4. We've got a 10-91C here, stopping to take a look."

10-91C is an injured animal.

"Base, it's a big... thing. Some sort of wolfhound, maybe? It's bleeding. Wait, that's not blood, it's some sort of... looks like oil? The warden will need a — shit!"

"Charlie 4, status?"

"Base! Fucking thing... bolted! In pursuit now, going to tase the animal. It's gone into a building. 1024 Harper."

That's an apartment block, I think. Lots of young families there. Oh dear.

static

"Shoot it! Shoot it! Watch the kid!"

static

"Oh God"

static

"Charlie 4, respond. Base calling Charlie 4, Charlie 4 are you receiving?"

Well now. As long-time listeners will remember, that's our third animal attack this month, I do believe. What's going on out there? Your guess is as good as mine — unless you're near Harper Street and can check it out for yourself.. Our lines are open...

CAMPAIGN PREMISE

All the player characters are regular listeners to a mysterious late-night radio station on a pirate frequency, presented by someone who calls himself Jack Scratch. The station splices in audio from an emergency radio band scanner and from intercepted phone calls (as well as mysterious audio that they could only obtain with hidden microphones) and presents it with a little sardonic commentary. Listen to Jack Scratch, and you're

listening to the hidden side of the city, to the spasms of crime and suffering. You get to hear ambulance crews racing to save lives, police responding to calls for assistance, the cries of the lost and the damned. It's voyeuristic, compelling reality radio.

Only sometimes, you hear things that hint at strangeness. Police reports of monsters. Ambulances where dead patients vanish. Taxi drivers talking about weird fares. Callers who phone in to complain about missing streets, about voices in their heads. It's clear that the authorities are deliberately ignoring — or even suppressing — information about the supernatural. Some of Jack Scratch's regular audience are police officers or other emergency responders, who listen to the show in the hopes of figuring out what's really going on.

At some low point in their respective pasts, each of the player characters started listening to Scratch's show. Perhaps it started as just entertainment, a way to while away a sleepless night. Perhaps they were featured on the show, their call for help played out across the airwaves.

For some listeners — like the player characters — the show is more than seedy late-night entertainment. They feel compelled to seek out the truth behind those disembodied voices on the radio, to find people and help them. There's an online forum where fans get together and discuss each show, but some take it even further. They go out and investigate the aftermath of impossible events, make contact with victims whose stories were dismissed by the police.

Think of them as volunteer social workers, helping people who face the unexplainable.

SETTING

This write-up places *The Dispatchers* in a generic modern-day American city (probably played by Vancouver if this was a television series). It needs to be large enough to support the prodigious number of missing persons and unsolved murders required by a horror campaign. As an online forum is a major part of the campaign structure, it needs to be set in the present day or thereabouts.

WHAT WENT BEFORE

The city's woes began in the late 1960s, when the military secretly experimented with remote viewing and other psychic powers. Their researchers

Fear Itself

theorized that a combination of hallucinogenic drugs could activate the dormant abilities of the human brain, and that these abilities could then be directed with high-frequency radio transmissions. In effect, they wanted to develop a reliable way to generate out-of-body experiences in volunteers, so they could then bounce the volunteer's astral body off the ionosphere to spy on Russian missile silos.

Instead, the experiments projected the minds of the unfortunate volunteers into the Outer Dark. Repeated test runs over the next five years weakened the Membrane, allowing Creatures of Unremitting Horror to slither into our world. The military base at the center of the experiments, Fort Carrig, was abandoned; the Membrane partially healed and the attacks ceased.

In the years since then, the city's expanded, and people are now living near the sealed-off remains of Fort Carrig. Their unconscious psychic powers have reopened the wound in the Membrane...

HOW IT PLAYS OUT

A typical session of *The Dispatchers*, early in the campaign, is a monster-of-the-week episode. Each time, the investigative trigger is a Jack Scratch broadcast that describes some supernatural encounter. The player characters investigate the aftermath of that encounter and find clues leading them into danger. They may get warned to stop investigating by the Authorities, or get help from members of the Dispatch Central forum.

Investigating, the characters uncover a supernatural creature or threat. In the end, they are able to banish this threat, or at least prevent it from killing again. Often, the initial victims of the threat end up becoming listeners to Jack Scratch and start posting on the forum, becoming resources for the investigators to draw on later in the campaign.

Over the course of the campaign, the players will:

- Learn that criminal forces in the city are trying to take advantage of the monster attacks
- Discover who Jack Scratch really is
- Uncover the reason why this place in particular is so fraught with supernatural horrors
- Find a way to seal the breach in the Membrane by descending into a horrific underworld beneath the city

CHARACTER CREATION

Create characters according to the normal rules in Chapter 2. Add the new Investigative Ability Dispatchers Forum to the list of available abilities.

Impersonate, Reassurance, and Cop Talk are very useful abilities in this campaign — the characters have no official standing, but usually come in on the heels of an official investigation.

As part of their backstory, each player must decide:

1. Why they started listening to Jack Scratch's show
2. Why they took the next step and began investigating the aftermath of the incidents broadcast by the show

New Investigative Ability: Dispatchers Forum (Academic)

You're a regular on a secret online forum, Dispatch Central, where listeners to the Jack Scratch show gather to discuss the intercepted transmissions and speculate about the truth behind the haunted city and Jack himself. Some of the regulars are (or at least claim to be) experts in various fields, and everything mentioned on the show gets discussed at length. This ability works like Research: you're adept at winnowing out the nonsense and the wild theories, and extracting any useful information from the forum. You can also post questions on the forum and hope that someone knows something that will aid your investigation.

Spend points from **Dispatchers Forum** to get favors and assistance from fellow forum members. The vast majority of them are unwilling or unable to join your investigations, but can help out by providing money, shelter, specialized knowledge or equipment, or leveraging their professional positions or contacts. Spend a point to declare that a nurse at the local hospital is a forum member, and she can get you into the morgue or treat your injuries. Spend a point to have the forum members spend hours searching through online traffic webcams to track down a car.

The downside of this ability is that you're trusting people you only know online. The forum is secret, but it's almost certainly been infiltrated by trolls, troublemakers, and police spies at the very least.

Use Drives (p. 157) for Risk Factors. Curious, Duty, Fated, Gung Ho, Haunted, Horrific Fascination, Skeptical, Truth-Seeking, and Vengeful are all ideal for this campaign.

CHARACTERS AND FACTIONS

THE DISPATCHER FORUM

Dispatch Central is an online forum for fans of the Jack Scratch show. It's unofficial and largely unmoderated, although new members have to be approved by the admins. The board was founded by "Bort" several years ago, but whoever Bort is, he or she hasn't logged on in a long time and doesn't respond to emails.

There are several thousand registered users, but only a few hundred active ones at any time. The main purpose of the board is to discuss the Jack Scratch show and its rumored supernatural connections, although the various off-topic subforums see as much traffic as the main forum. There's also an invite-only forum where "Dispatchers" — volunteers who actively follow up on suspected supernatural incidents — can meet and coordinate their investigations. All the player characters are members of this restricted forum.

Popular competing theories about the Jack Scratch show include:

- It's all a hoax, and the recordings are a mix of genuine police traffic and scripted radio drama. Anyone who claims to have proof of the supernatural is lying or in on the hoax.
- It's all real, and Jack's a modern-day prophet, warning people to get ready for the coming storm.
- It's all real, and Jack's part of it — he's luring people to their deaths by getting them to investigate the supernatural.
- It's an experiment in government mind control, or subliminal social engineering. The "monsters" are escaped experiments, or the side effects of hallucinogenic drugs.

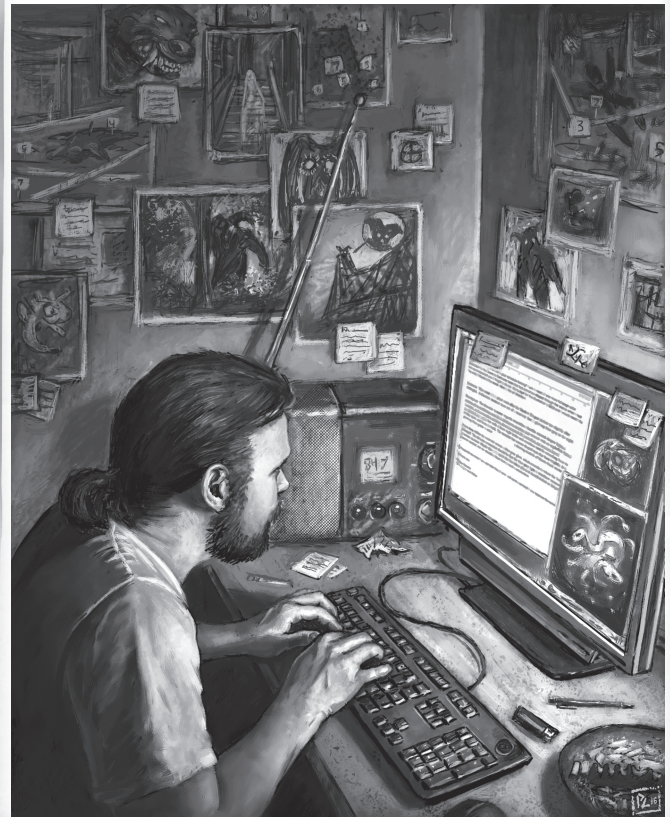
The "Field Investigations" subforum for Dispatchers was founded by a user named **Martin Yates**, who was the first person to actively follow up on the show's broadcast messages. He investigated several cases involving the

supernatural, until he fell from a rooftop and broke his spine. He's still unable to walk, but is an avid participant and organizer of other Dispatchers (indeed, his drive to investigate the supernatural can be off-putting, even dangerous — he'll browbeat and intimidate player characters who consider quitting the forum).

AGENDA

The forum doesn't have an agenda per se, but individual forum members may play a larger role as the campaign develops.

- Martin Yates starts out as a mentor for the player characters, but becomes unstable and dangerous later on. He might get some other investigators killed by sending them unprepared into danger, or start treating the player characters as enemies, believing them to be in league with the Outer Dark.
- The forum is definitely under surveillance by several hostile groups, including the Authorities and the Operation. Player characters who rely too much on the forum may give away key information to their enemies.



Fear Itself

- The player characters may be amateur investigators, but at least they're not clueless, naive amateur investigators. Other members of the forum might try carrying out their own field investigations and get into trouble.

JACK SCRATCH

Early in the campaign, Jack Scratch is a plot dispenser — each week, he hints at the existence of a mystery for the player characters to investigate. Later, the players will inevitably want to find out who Jack really is and how the show actually works. Some facts:

- The show is on an illegal, pirate radio station, broadcasting from a mobile transmitter. It's infrequent, and reception is weirdly unreliable. Some people can never seem to tune into the show at all.
- Although Jack sometimes has callers phoning in, he never broadcasts his number. The show has no official presence at all, providing neither contact details nor website.
- Jack Scratch is clearly a pseudonym. The presenter, whoever he is, has given away a few personal details over the years: he talks about his ex-wife "Lulu" and his time in "the war." He shows little sympathy for the people whose calls for help he broadcasts, occasionally laughing or joking at their plight.
- There's at least one other member of staff, Jack's long-suffering producer, "Tina."

Over the course of the campaign, the investigators might discover any of the following:

- Jack's "callers" are all dead people, speaking from beyond the grave.
- Jack's show is unstuck in time — sometimes, he broadcasts emergency calls that haven't happened yet.
- Jack used to work at Fort Carrig military base, before the accident.
- Jack isn't human. He might be a Mystery Man (p. 82) or some other Creature of Unremitting Horror.

- Jack is actually one of the other members of the Dispatch Central forum (Martin Yates is the obvious candidate).

AGENDA

There are two possible agendas for Jack; don't commit to one or the other at the start of the campaign.

If Jack Scratch is human, then he's using his show to fight back against the monsters. In this scenario, he's a half-crazed survivor of experiments in Fort Carrig, broadcasting his show from a bunker or RV using a ramshackle pile of stolen military gear, living on whiskey, cigarettes, and fast food brought by Tina. (Alternatively, Jack's a paranoid madman who treats the show as entertainment, and Tina's trying to walk the tightrope by passing information via the show to those who can help fight back against the darkness, without Jack suspecting what she's doing.)

In this case, Jack's show becomes increasingly focused on the player characters as the campaign goes on, as he tries to shape them into weapons. He's not above manipulating or endangering them; he's a master of impersonation and evidence tampering, and could get the characters fired from their jobs so they have more time to devote to monster-hunting, or estrange them from their loved ones so they can be paranoid loners like him.

His agenda might be:

- Drop an especially challenging case in front of the investigators to test their skills
- Investigate the investigators and learn more about them
- Put the investigators in touch with people who can "help" them, such as the Operation
- Start attacking the factors that, in his eyes, hold the investigators back. Friends, family, loved ones — the sooner they're all cut off and cauterized, the better.
- Put the player characters through the same supernatural initiation he experienced at Fort Carrig

On the other hand, if Jack Scratch is a supernatural entity in his own right, then his game is to lure vulnerable

people like the player characters into investigating the horror. He drops just enough of a trail of breadcrumbs to bring them over the edge into the Outer Dark.

He might:

- Use the player characters' attempts to find the source of his transmissions to lure them into danger ("Hey! The radio signal's coming from inside this abandoned mine shaft!")
- Send Creatures of Unremitting Horror to torment the characters' loved ones
- Leak secret information about Ascent Properties or the Operation to the player characters, triggering a shadow war between the city's mortal factions

THE AUTHORITIES

The city's police force, Chamber of Commerce, and other civic bodies. They know that certain parts of the city are... are what? Sick? Haunted? Dangerous? Tainted? No one's willing to put a name to the phenomenon, not yet. No one wants to be the first one to say "monsters."

The city's on the verge of a property boom. The economy's moving in the right direction; there are lots of foreign companies talking about opening factories and research facilities here. Everyone could make a lot of money if it all goes smoothly, and spreading wild stories about serial killers or Satanic cults or monsters is bad for business. They've got to keep Ascent Properties happy.

Anyone who tries rocking the boat, who talks too much — why, they're troublemakers. Dangerous fringe dissidents, probably out there reading grubby printouts of the Unabomber's journal entries and plotting to blow up City Hall.

Right now, the biggest problem for the Authorities is Officer Teeth. So far, they've managed to keep the media from reporting on isolated incidents of strangeness, but a serial killer who pretends to be a cop is far too juicy a story to ignore.

KEY FIGURES

Mayor Bresworth: Cynical, always with one eye on reelection. However, he grew up in Barren Valley and has not forgotten all his ties there.

Chris Pollard: Bresworth's PR flack/fixer/right hand. Supremely slimy, with connections to the Operation.

Police Detective Mayez: Homicide detective; no patience for amateurs or their nonsense talk of monsters.

AGENDA

- Catch Officer Teeth
- Suppress any proof of the supernatural
- Shut down anyone who causes problems or draws attention to the city's weirdness
- Bring down the Operation
- Sell out the city to Ascent Properties

ASCENT PROPERTIES

Ascent Properties' business model is to buy up neighborhoods on the cheap and redevelop them. Rumors of dirty tricks, intimidation, and even murder follow the company around, but never penetrate the whirling flock of lawyers and spin doctors that flutters around Ascent's dark heart. The company has diverse investments in other fields, such as medical research and military R&D; the one common thread seems to be making money out of human misery.

To the Authorities, Ascent Properties can do no wrong — the company is the linchpin of plans to revitalize the city by turning decrepit, degenerate areas into shiny new shopping malls and apartment blocks.

Secretly, Ascent Properties knows about the Outer Dark and the monsters. Nothing depresses property prices like supernatural killings. That isn't to imply that Ascent Properties is summoning Creatures of Unremitting Horror for cheap real estate — they're just opportunistic, taking advantage of the Creatures coming through the breach. At least, that's the situation at the start of the campaign — depending on how the Ascent Properties agenda plays out, they may become corrupted by the Outer Dark later in the game.

KEY FIGURES

Madeline Prowse: CEO of Ascent Properties; ambitious and amoral.

Fear Itself

Ernest Chok: Ascent's enforcer; ex-military.

Dr. Varney: Director of Ascent's new research division.

AGENDA

- Identify neighborhoods being tormented by monsters, then swoop in and buy property while people are scared and motivated to sell
- Learn more about the Outer Dark
- Come to an arrangement — or have a showdown — with the Operation
- Make contact with the Outer Dark in order to gain control of it (target neighborhoods they want to buy up/weaponize monsters)
- Get corrupted by the Outer Dark and merge with a Threadhead
- Buy up the remains of Fort Carrig

- Build a temple to the Outer Dark; tear down the Membrane

THE OPERATION

The Operation is an organized criminal outfit; narcotics, prostitution, and protection are their main rackets. They had a relatively cozy arrangement with elements in City Hall before Ascent Properties arrived on the scene. Now, they're on the defensive — especially since Officer Teeth showed up, and seems to be targeting Operation members disproportionately in his murders.

KEY FIGURES

Boss Logue: Elderly and infirm, but still vicious. When he dies, it'll trigger a bloody civil war within the Operation.

Linda Mathers: The Operation's lawyer.

Little Joe: Hulking legbreaker; Logue's preferred street-level goon.



THREADHEAD

One of us! One of us! One of us!

Threadheads are drawn to small, intimate groups. The keyword (or ghastly pun) you're looking for is "close-knit." Families, church groups, sports teams, corporate teams, circles of friends. Parties of player characters, even.

Any group that proclaims "us against the world" might draw the attention of a Threadhead. It looks like a tiny, hairy imp, with a bristly beard. It carries a sharp needle in one hand; proportionately, it looks like a spear in the Threadhead's grip. The Threadhead only exists while the group is together. Think of it as the embodiment of a collective bad decision, a mob mentality made flesh. *It's only there when you're all there.*

When it materialized, the Threadhead offered to knit you all together, bring you closer. You accepted its offer (and it seemed like a really good idea at the time), and it did just that. Big, fat, hairy threads on its sharp needle, plunged first into your eye, then out through your skull and into the eye of one of your friends, and then another, and then another. Tying you all together.

Like the Threadhead, the threads binding you only exist when the group gathers together. The more of the group present, the more real they are. When there's only one member of the group present, there's nothing there. When there are two, then maybe an observer could dimly glimpse a black strand running from one member to the other, but it's just a trick of the light. When they're all there, there are physical cords running between the members of the group.

There are benefits to being sewn together with your best friends. Members of the Threadhead collective can communicate telepathically and share their ability pools. The downside is that for every point shared, the threads grow tighter and tighter, until the group's pulled so tightly together that they merge into a single horrible mass of sewn-together heads and torsos and limbs.

When a Threadhead collective forms, the imp returns and sews itself into the mix as a new and grotesque head, which gives it control of the shared body. It can still unpick individual bodies and send them out on short errands, but there's no escape for any of its victims — they're forever part of the Threadhead. (Some accounts claim that if you steal the imp's needle and reforge it into a pair of scissors, you can cut the cords.)

THREADHEAD IMP

Abilities: Aberrance 8, Athletics 6, Health 6, Scuffling 4

Hit Threshold: 5

Armor: +0

Awareness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +3

Damage Modifier: darning needle +2

THREADHEAD COLLECTIVE

Abilities: Aberrance 4, Athletics 8, Health 24, Scuffling 18

Hit Threshold: 3

Armor: +2

Awareness Modifier: +0

Stealth Modifier: -2

Damage Modifier: crushing limbs +2/+2/+2

AGENDA

- Get the inside scoop on Ascent Properties
- Find a way to get a cut of the profits from Ascent Properties, or else hit them until they start paying up
- Take down Officer Teeth
- Kidnap Dr. Varney

- Force Dr. Varney to replicate and start selling the hallucinogenic drugs used in the Fort Carrig experiments. Optionally, there might be a connection to Bluegold Research (p. 114).

OFFICER TEETH

Seen from a distance, or when he's wearing his riot mask, Officer Teeth might be mistaken for one of the city's police force. Most people just see the badge, the uniform.

Fear Itself

OFFICER TEETH

Abilities: Aberrance 12, Athletics 8, Health 16, Scuffling 12, Shooting 10

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: +2

Awareness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: +1

Damage Modifiers: +1 (baton) or +4 (bite) or +1 plus special (tooth gun)

Slasher Movement: Spend 1 Aberrance to appear somewhere unlikely. (He's inside your house.) Those nearby get a Sense Trouble test to realize something's wrong. Alternatively, for 2 Aberrance, Officer Teeth gets to burst out of some hiding place and make a free attack on a victim. This power can also be used to vanish; it costs 1 point to disappear, but Officer Teeth

has to be unobserved when vanishing. Vanishing into a crowd of cops counts as being unobserved.

Bite: Officer Teeth can only use his Bite attack on enemies that are already Hurt, unable to escape, or taken by surprise.

Tooth Gun: Officer Teeth's gun fires human teeth. If he spends 1 Aberrance when he shoots his gun, then any wounds caused by the gun turn into little mouths that try to eat everything around them. So, if he shoots you in the shoulder, you've now got a mouth in your shoulder that's trying to eat your upper arm. These mouths deal 1 damage per round until removed (with a 2-point Medic spend or by dealing 2 points of damage to the victim to cut out the mouth).

They see the job and not the man — or the monster — beneath. They don't notice the waxy substance he has for skin, or the way the steel bones protrude from his cold hands. It's only when he smiles that they see he's got three sets of teeth, like a shark, and that his mouth runs down his neck, into his chest, along his arms, so when he bites it's like he unzips, his whole upper body unfolding into a mess of teeth and tongues.

Remember, children, if you're lost and you don't know what to do, ask a policeman for help.

Teeth blends in with the rest of the police force, appearing only when he can hide in plain sight. He pretends to be human until people let down their guard, and then... chomp.

AGENDA

Destroy people's faith in law and order, in justice and community. Turn them against one another until they're all just frightened rats, clawing each other for territory.

Chomp.
Chomp.
Chomp.

LOCATIONS

CITY DINER

A grubby, run-down, but friendly diner frequented by the player characters. It's their regular meeting place and unofficial headquarters. They meet with Martin Yates there every few weeks, although he prefers to check in with them online.

BARREN VALLEY

A large, poverty-stricken neighborhood on the edge of the city. Barren Valley was built in the 1980s, when the city expanded into land previously owned by the military at Fort Carrig. When the base was shut down, the land was rezoned for residential and commercial use. Now, Barren Valley is the primary target for Ascent Properties' plans to redevelop the city; the Operation runs the neighborhood from behind the scenes.

FORT CARRIG

A former military base, shut down and mostly demolished in the 1980s. Some of the land around the base was bought by the city to make Barren Valley and Shadow Park; other parts of the old base were designated hazardous due to "spilled chemicals" and

“unexploded munitions,” and are still quarantined. Local rumor insists that Fort Carrig extends deep beneath the ground, and that old Cold War tunnels and bunkers run under much of Barren Valley.

Secretly, Fort Carrig was home to experiments in psychic warfare that weakened the Membrane. Creatures of Unremitting Horror lurk in the abandoned depths; in the lowest levels, time has been corroded to such a degree that soldiers and crazed psychics are still alive down there, caught in that one disastrous day in 1974 when they inadvertently punched a hole in the Membrane.

SHADOW PARK

A large public park within Barren Valley; all sorts of strange things are said to happen there, and the trees are oddly malformed and diseased. There have been allegations that chemicals from Fort Carrig leached into the soil, and that the park should never have been opened to the public. During the warmer months, many homeless people cluster in the park, especially in the forested end.

SOUTH QUARTER

The city’s high-tech district, an arc of pharmaceutical plants and tech companies, all gleaming and new. As South Quarter expands, it’s pressing on the edges of Barren Valley.

ADVENTURE SEEDS

In the early stages of a *Dispatchers* campaign, the players take a reactive role, responding to plot hooks and clues from Jack Scratch’s radio show or the online forum. Once they learn about the various factions and their plans for the city, the players can start driving the story forward with their own schemes.

THE OUTBREAK

The Dispatcher Forum identifies a particular apartment block as being the locus for an outbreak of weird events. Investigating, the characters discover that the water supply for the building has been contaminated by chemicals from the remains of Fort Carrig, and everyone living there has been exposed to the same sort of mind-altering drugs that led to the 1974 breach in the Membrane. Some of the apartments have been dragged into the Outer Dark; others are now home

to monsters. To seal the breach, the investigators need to break into the basement and shut down the water supply.

EVICTIMS

Another member of the Dispatcher Forum complains (in the off-topic area) that she’s about to be evicted from her home, and needs help fighting against the property developers (Ascent Properties) that are trying to force her out. When the characters go to help, they discover that an Ascent employee has been murdered, and the Dispatcher is a suspect.

The real killer is one of the other residents in the condemned building — a Creature of Unremitting Horror that made its nest here decades ago, and isn’t leaving.

SONGS OF THE DEAD

Without explanation, Jack Scratch starts playing tracks by a local band from the ’80s, the Averroes. The lead singer of that band infamously died in a fire, and there are lots of local rumors that he committed suicide. Their final album is full of cryptic occult references and seems to talk about other forms of existence and bargains with strange, alien entities.

The radio transmissions become oddly distorted, as if some other signal is interfering with them. At the same time, a light is seen above the city at night, as if something’s coming down from space.

Did the lead singer of the Averroes somehow transmute himself into an astral form before he died, and project himself into outer space — or the Outer Dark? And if so, why is Jack Scratch trying to guide that disembodied intellect back to Earth — and what’s it going to do when it gets here?

THE LOST GIRL

A young girl goes missing. She was last seen in Shadow Park. The police have failed to find her. Spurred on by media pressure, groups including the Dispatchers start searching for her. Investigating, the characters discover that she’s the prisoner of an Ovvashi (p. 84), who’s using her to lure more people into the park so it can make its devil’s bargains with them, too. If the characters want to find the girl, they’ll have to cut a deal with the monster...

Fear Itself

CHARACTER SHEET

PLAYER NAME :

CHARACTER NAME :

CHARACTER CONCEPT :

SOURCES OF STABILITY :

NOTES:

ABILITIES :

ACADEMIC

- History
- Humanities
- Languages
- Law
- Occult Studies
- Research
- Social Sciences
- Trivia
-
-
-
-

INTERPERSONAL

- Bullshit Detector
- Bureaucracy
- Cop Talk
- Flattery
- Flirting
- Impersonate
- Interrogation
- Intimidation
- Negotiation
- Reassurance
- Streetwise
-
-
-
-

TECHNICAL

- Computer Use
- Investigative Procedure
- Medicine
- Notice
- Outdoor Survival
- Photography
- Science
-
-
-

GENERAL

- Athletics
- Driving
- Filch
- Fleeing
- Health
- Hiding
- Infiltration
- Mechanics
- Medic
- Preparedness
- Scuffling
- Sense Trouble
- Shooting
- Shrink
- Stability
-
-
-
-

PSYCHIC POWERS

- Aura Reading
- Medium
- Messenger
- Premonitions
- Remote Viewing
- Sensitive
- Synchronicity
-
-
-
-



Fear Itself

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