Dark Places of the World!

The first in an investigative series of Conan articles. This month: XUTHAL!

Scripture Magic!

Discover the true power of the written word!

The Fear Files!

Terrifying alien entities are explored in this article for OGL Horror!

Plus. . . No Room For Error, Gamers' Symposium, The Sons Of The Kraken, Everybody Wants To Rule The World, Between Hammer And Anvil, Jonny Nexus, Inside The Cahinmail Bra and and lots, lots more!

Signs & Portents

Greetings!

Last month (well, it was last month at the time of writing (it'll be the month before last by the time you get round to reading it (except if the magazine comes out early (unless, or course, you're reading this at a later date in which case 'last month' will be 'some time in the past', (unless you've somehow managed to read this before I've written it (which is unlikely))))) – anyway, I'm referring to November in 2005 to avoid confusion (well, more confusion)) I was visiting the mythic corridors of Mongoose Towers in the exotic surroundings of, erm, Swindon (as a freelancer, I usually work from home in Winchester). It was great to see the high powered inertia of a roleplaying game company at work and was able to put names to faces (such as Mongoose office assistant, Nick Robinson, who I've known for some five years but didn't actually recognise until the Tuesday – meeting people that you know only from the Internet can be an odd experience!)

Anyway, suffice to say, I managed to persuade young Nick that he wanted to write Tales from Mongoose Hall - so it may return some time in the future (the gang are currently repeatedly dying, ahem, *playing*, through the epic Drow War campaign, so be aware – there will be spoilers!)

Be seeing you!

Matt

Signs & Portents Roleplayer Contents

Features

Regulars

EYE ON MONGOOSE

Forthcoming Releases
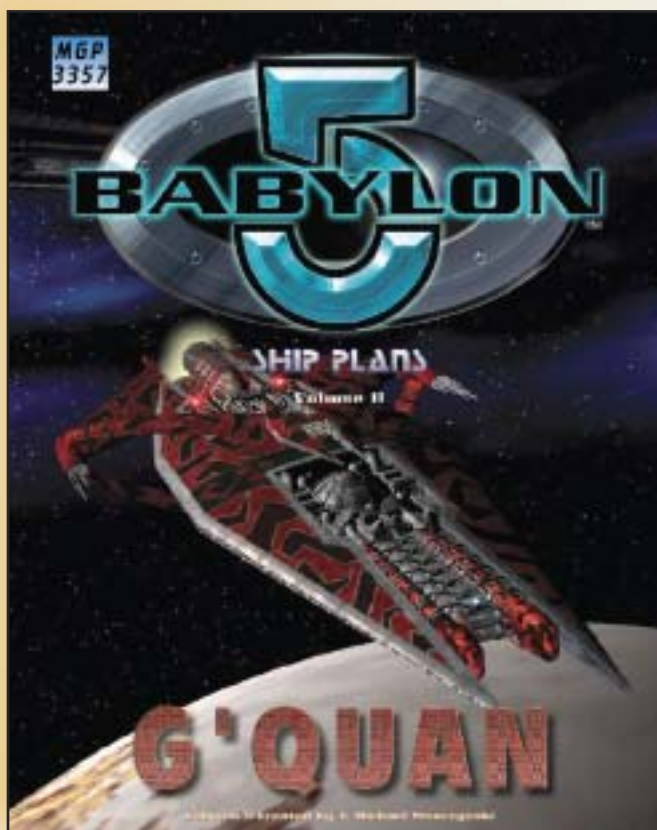
G'Quan Ship Plans

This latest product in the new Ship Plans range for the B5 universe is a complete tour of one of the Narn Regime's finest warships: The magnificent G'Quan-class heavy cruiser, in all its glory. The G'Quan forms the core of any Narn attack fleet. With the development of the G'Quan, the Narn finally threw off their dependence upon old Centauri technology and implemented revolutionary design features.

G'Quan Ship Plans takes you through every aspect of this workhorse of the Narn Regime fleet – every bulkhead, generator, capability and design flaw. Painstakingly researched from both the B5 canon universe and real-life naval and space vessels, every deck on the ship has a full, detailed and to-scale schematic, along with accompanying descriptions and explanations.

The Drow War: Book III
The Darkest Hour
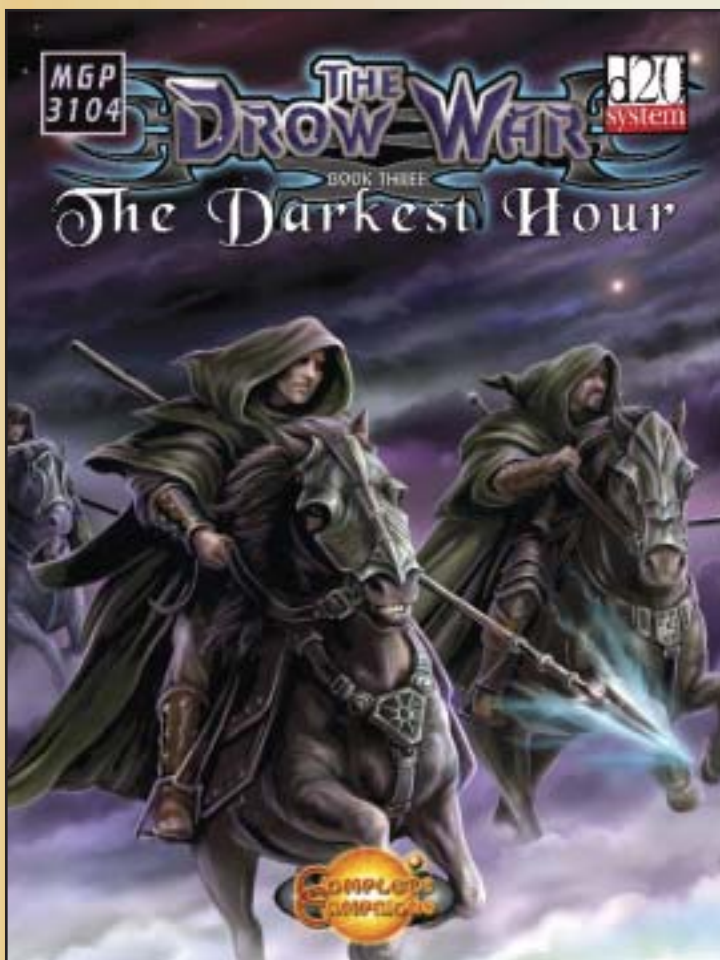
The Drow War: Book III - The Darkest Hour begins on the world of Ashfar, where a peace forged in blood has been bitterly broken. Something is causing the barriers between worlds to collapse, smashing plane into plane, opening rifts through which atrocious fiends can step into the ordinary world and cause chaos. Even former enemies recognise the threat. Is it written in the heavens that the Starborn and the drow must always be opposed or can the dark ones truly change? Can the olive branch be accepted or is this just another trick?

In the haven of a dead god's skull, infernal and heavenly creatures meet to determine the fate of the worlds. Faced with a gathering of strange and sinister individuals from across the planes, the Player Characters must choose their allies well. Can these ancient enemies possibly act together and prevent the coming catastrophe or will the Player Characters stand alone against the Dark? With the debris of shattered worlds serving as incontestable proof that whole planes have already been destroyed, the race is on to find the powers behind it. The dust is blown off old books and legends are ransacked for information. There are at least three items that can work this kind of magic, but which – if any – is the artefact responsible?

The Drow War: Book I - The Gathering Storm saw the Player Characters save nations. *The Drow War: Book II - The Dying of the Light* saw them save the world of Ashfar. Now, in *The Drow War: Book III - The Darkest Hour*, they must save a million worlds. The fate of the cosmos rests in the hands of the Starborn and those they choose to ally with. Only one thing is certain…

Whichever path the future takes, whichever side is victorious, this is the final battle of the Drow War.

The Drow War: Book III - The Darkest Hour is third in a series of three 256-page books. Each one contains a single epic story, all three tie into one overarching saga. The adventures in this book are designed to take the characters concerned from 21st level to 30th level.

Babylon 5
Merchants, Traders & Raiders
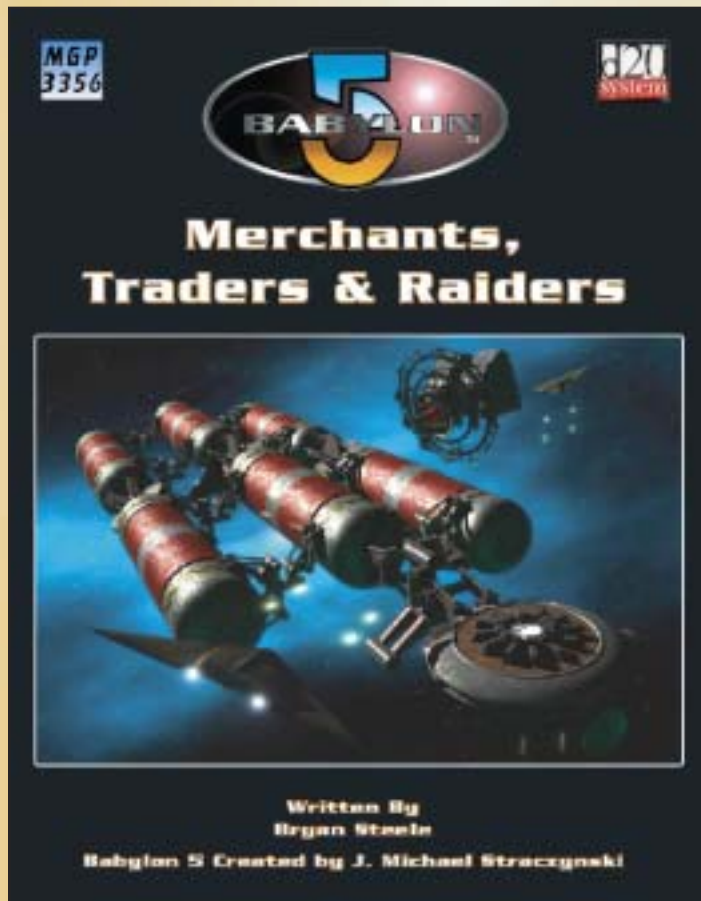
'There is nothing finer than setting eyes on so many tons of spinning metal, thousands of people and miles of electronics held together by millions of credits. It is beautiful.'

The Babylon 5 universe is filled with starship battles and riots that permeate the galaxy. Yet not all plots and schemes are enforced from behind a firing console or powered-up PPG. Most are fought with credits and politics, boycotts and embargoes. Wars of this kind can be fought without a single shot being fired but still crush entire populations in their wake. A merciless master of trading warfare controls thousands, making pawns of all others.

Whether you wish to escort priceless shipments to a safe harbour or attack them for fun and profit, this book is your invaluable key to success! Whether used for plot support or reference material, *Babylon 5: Merchants, Traders & Raiders* embroils Babylon 5 fans in the dangerous world of trade plots and piracy. Some of the facts within these pages are public knowledge – but some are secrets the megacorporations kill to keep...

PARANOIA
Criminal Histories
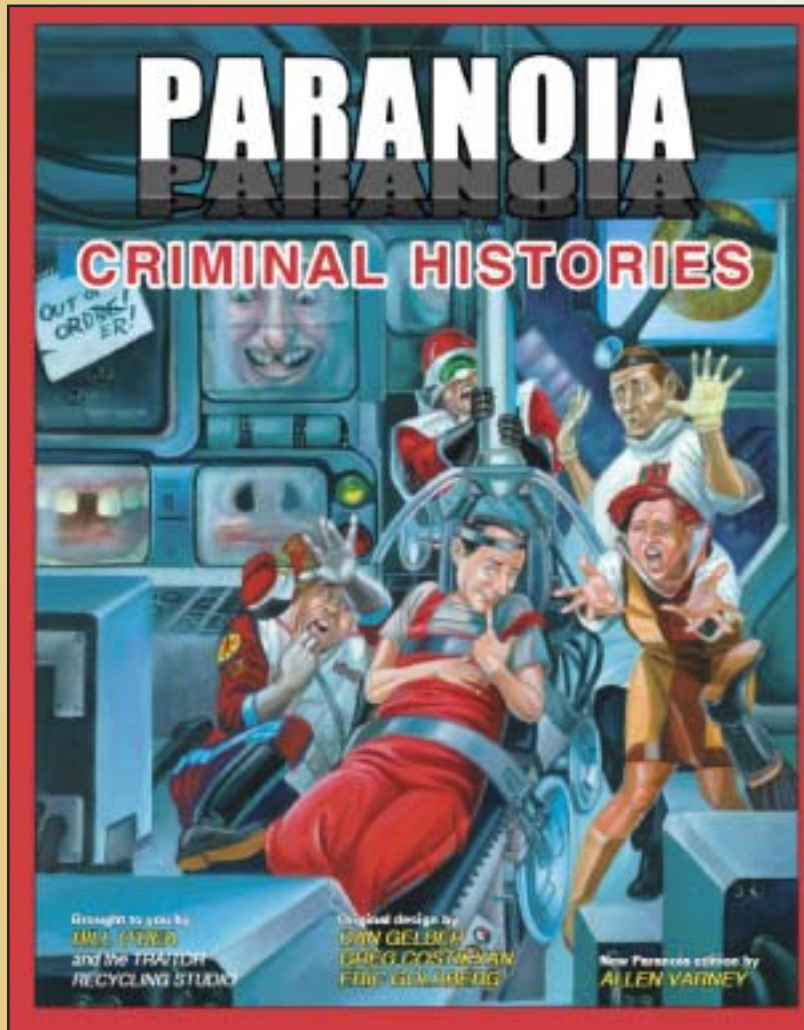
A character-building supplement by BILL O'DEA and the TRAITOR RECYCLING STUDIO

Illustrated by JIM HOLLOWAY

The *PARANOIA* rulebook's method for creating your **Troubleshooter** player character (PC) is, of course, perfect. Now your friend **The Computer** offers an even *more* perfect way to create PCs and the nonplayer characters who know and suspect them. This *Criminal Histories* rules supplement uses character kits and the amazing *Prehistory Pachinko* lifepath system to load your character with **bonus skills** and **specialties**, cool **illegal equipment**, highly placed **contacts** and a whole dossier of past accomplishments.

True, some of your accomplishments were treasonous—and your high-clearance contacts may remember how you messed them over—and your teammates can now **investigate your background** and uncover your traitorous past. But take heart! Investigate them first, and accuse them before they accuse you!

Some early roleplaying games had character creation rules that could kill your PC before the game began. **Ha!** In *Criminal Histories* your *PARANOIA* character can die *multiple times* before you go to your first briefing or shoot your first teammate. That's progress!

Babylon 5
Darkness & Light
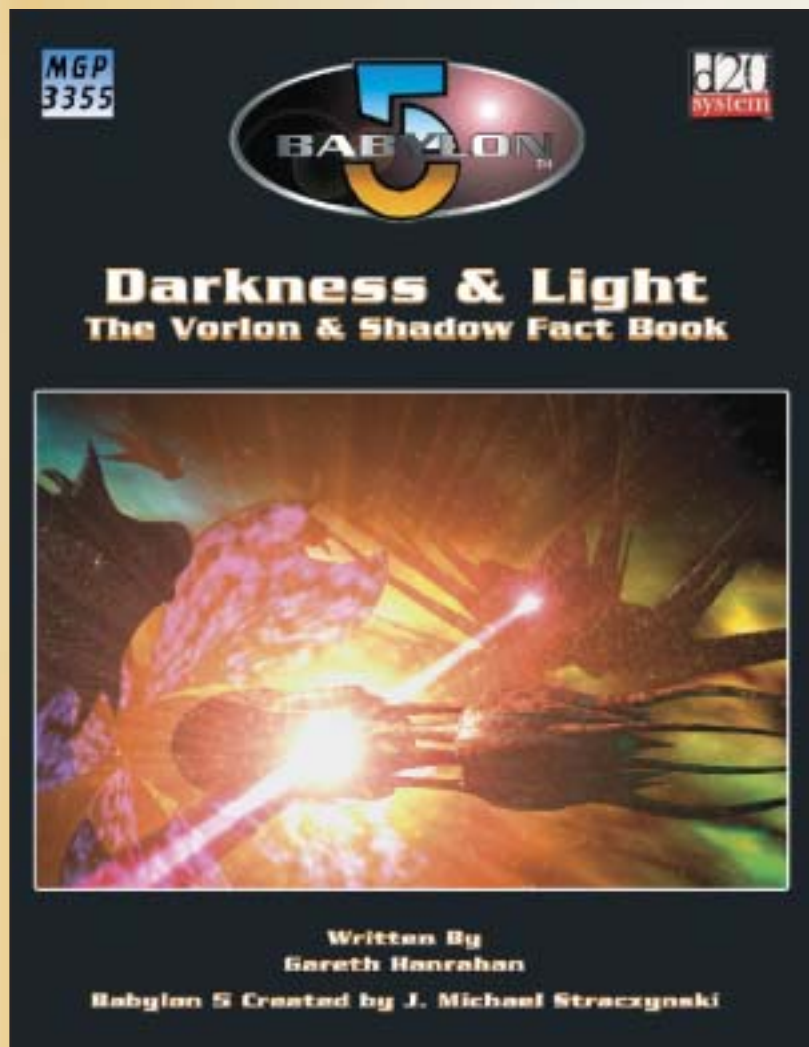
'There are beings in the universe billions of years older than either of our races. Once, long ago, they walked among the stars like giants, vast, timeless. Taught the Younger Races, explored beyond the Rim, created great empires, but to all things, there is an end. Slowly, over a million years, the First Ones went away. Some passed beyond the stars never to return. Some simply disappeared.'

'But not all of the First Ones have gone away.'

Intelligent life is ancient in this universe. Before the Earth and the Sun congealed out of space dust, there were races travelling between the stars in shining ships. Living beings heard the echoes of the Big Bang reverberate off the cosmic spheres. Alien voices sang as the stars of this galaxy were born. These beings eventually found life developing on a hundred worlds. Not wanting to be alone, they nurtured this burgeoning life. Slowly, over millennia, more sentient beings evolved and took their first steps towards the stars.

These races would become the Vorlons and the Shadows. Unfathomable years later, they would be as gods to the Younger Races. One embodies the principle of chaos. The other purports the rule of order. Darkness and Light, each as terrible and powerful as the other, locked in an aeon-old struggle for dominance of the galaxy.

XUTHAL

W. Jason Peck

Journey to the Dark Corners of the Hyborean World in Conan the Roleplaying Game

Deep in the burning deserts of southern Kush lies the lost city of Xuthal. No chronicle of the modern Hyborian Age makes mention of it and the madness that grips its people makes them largely unaware of everything beyond the city walls. For though Xuthal is still occupied by the descendants of a once mighty race, the people have fallen into the dream deliriums of the black lotus blossom and even they have little perception of this forgotten city in the nameless desert.

Like several other near-mythical ruins of the Hyborian Age, Xuthal is constructed of titanic blocks of green stone that shimmer like glass in the hot sun. However, unlike every other such site, Xuthal still stands and is occupied by descendants of the ancients who must have raised these fantastic structures. Many scholars speculate that such monumental constructions could only have been reared by the Lemurians, a legendary people said to be so far advanced as to make Hyborians seem apes in comparison. Certainly the advanced technologies the current Xuthalans use lends credence to this claim. Unfortunately, though the Xuthalans use the remnants of these technologies, they hardly understand the science that underlies them and they have little or no knowledge of the people whose legacy they exploit. The typical Xuthalan

knows only enough to make these advanced technologies work, which is enough to keep the people of Xuthal fed and living in the lap of luxury. All their remaining scientific efforts were turned generations ago to the study of the mysteries of black lotus. Their diligence in these studies was perhaps too successful, as today they are botanical masters – capable of handling the black lotus plant without harm and distilling an assortment of potent drugs from it. Sadly, most of their time is now spent in the death-like sleep these drugs induce, dreaming of the mystical mysteries of the cosmos and remaining unaware that their culture continues to march its way towards extinction.

Using Xuthal in Your Game

Perhaps the most awe-inspiring and wondrous elements of the classic Conan stories are the numerous ruins of bygone eras that he visits during his adventures. In an era so long-removed from our own that it is nothing short of mythical, the monuments to ancient civilisations that Conan explores during the Hyborian Age recall antiquities so old that they seem to predate mankind altogether. If not man, then what alien hands reared these strange stones? It is a mystery that is never fully explained in Robert E. Howard's Conan tales and one that resonates through our own modern psyches in the same way any mention of Atlantis does. There is a pull to ancient things, a draw that calls to us all. However, as Conan often learned, some such sites are best left shrouded in the cloaking mists of history.

This article explores one of the most infamous ruins Conan visits during his adventures – the lost city of Xuthal. The ruin is placed in context within the Hyborian Age and then detailed in

Xuthal

GATE

Well

Thog's Dome

N

25 Yards

☐ 5 Feet

┄ Conan & Natala's Path into Xuthal

1 Conan & Natala's feast

2 Fountain

3 Thalis' Torture Chamber

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Iron Ring Whip

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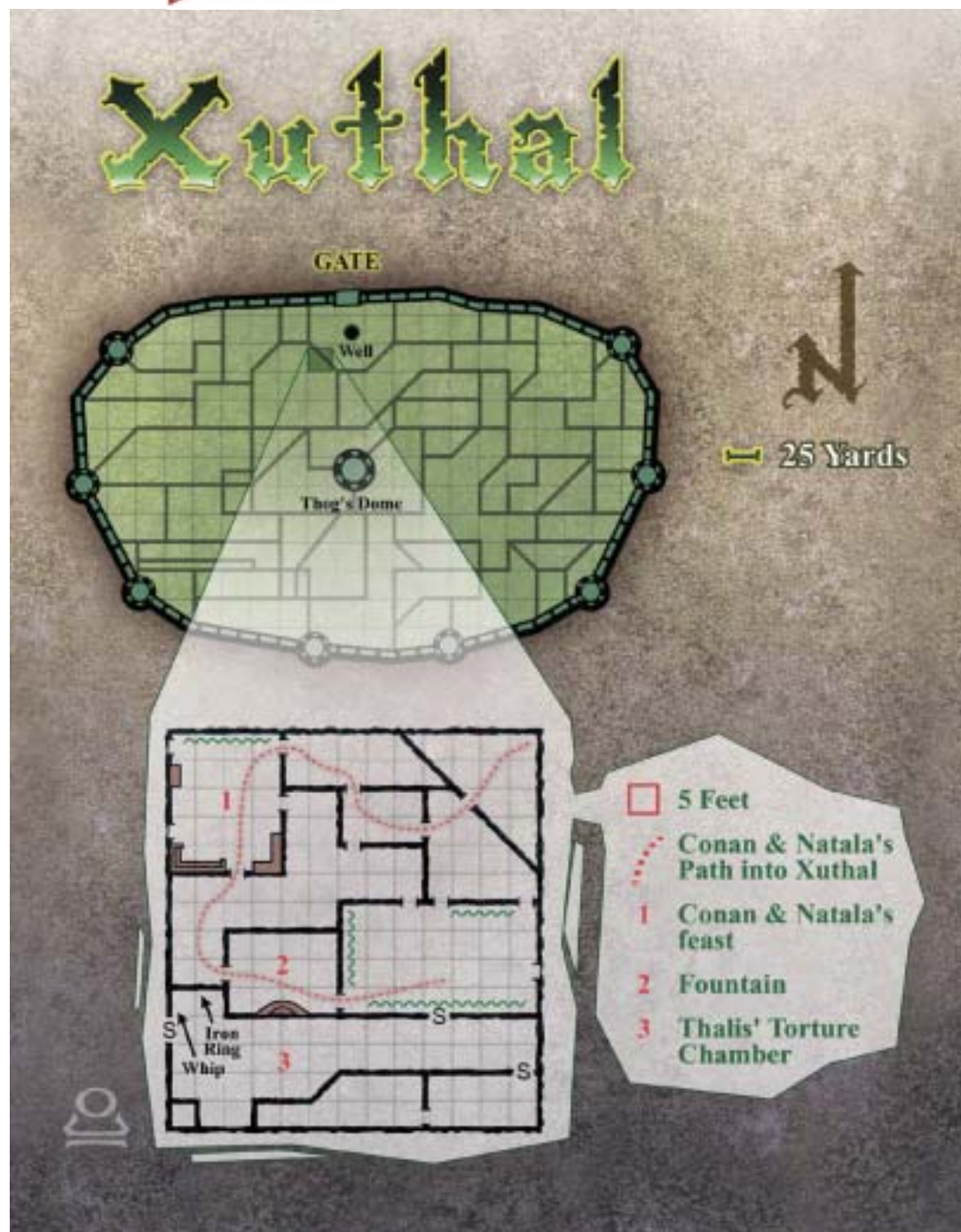
a number of ways – including its position on the continent, the environs in which it is set, its known history, any and all its current denizens, the treasures to be found there and much more. Of course, not everything is predetermined concerning this mysterious place and plenty of room is left to allow individual Games Masters to stamp their own brand of play upon them.

So what are you waiting for? Take a firm grip on your sword pommel and whisper a quick prayer to Mitra, because now we delve deep into the mysteries of the black eons…

Myths and Legends

There are no specific myths that make mention of Xuthal and its strange people circulated beyond its walls. The only legends that would apply are those concerning all the known ruins of green-stoned cities found throughout the continent and even these are meagre in content at best. Most scholars speculate that these were all built by the same forgotten race, or at least related races that sprang from the same original source. Some even go so far as to name this race as the near-mythical Lemurians, though this is far from the accepted theory. The only other 'fact' associated with these unknown builders is that they must have been far more advanced than the peoples of the current era. The cities are too vast in scale, too precisely laid out and too alien in construction to have been made by anything less than a superior civilisation. Even more telling are the locations of these ruins, all situated deep inside a wilderness too far removed from natural resources to have supported even a small populace by any means known to the peoples of the Hyborian Age.

In the event that a Games Master's campaign is set in a time after Conan's visit to Xuthal, then any number of other rumours concerning the city may have leaked to the world at large via Conan or Natala. Whether such is the case or not, and what the nature of these rumours might be exactly, is left to the Games Master to determine.

> *A weird, unreal atmosphere hung over all. Traversing this dim, silent palace was like an opium dream. Some of the chambers were unlighted, and these they avoided. Others were bathed in a soft, weird light that seemed to emanate from jewels set in the walls in fantastic design.*
>
> *Robert E. Howard, The Slithering Shadow*

Region and Environment

Xuthal sits astride an oasis in the deep deserts of southern Kush. Surrounded on all sides by a desolate and unforgiving countryside, the city appears long abandoned. Nothing moves in this wasteland and the outlying land lies totally untouched by the hands of man. So brutal is the afternoon sun in this region, often climbing beyond 110 degrees, the city's gleaming walls and shining spires are easy to mistake as a mirage. Yet Xuthal is no trick of the sun and cool apartments and fine foodstuffs can be found within.

A day's march to the south lies a smaller oasis and beyond that begins the broad grasslands that cover much of the southern regions of the Black Kingdoms. No road leads to this oasis from the city. Indeed, no road of any kind makes its way from Xuthal. The city is self-serving and isolated, completely out of touch with the outside world.

FLORA

The region in which Xuthal stands is completely devoid of vegetation. Not even the rugged shrubs and prickly cacti that cling to life elsewhere in these southern deserts can be found within ten miles of the city's glassy walls. So extreme is this desolation that it seems to defy the very natural order of things, and so it does. Any character exposed to this environment for more than two hours and who makes a successful Knowledge (nature) or Survival check (DC 15) can determine that something about this landscape is terribly out of joint. The land is too arid for any desert and the whole situation reeks of the supernatural. In fact, though there is no way for Player Characters to know it, the entire landscape for a distance of ten miles in all directions from Xuthal has been modified by the advanced technologies of the ancients who once built it. All moisture in this prepared region is systematically drawn away via a series of underground aqueducts to be stored in vast cisterns beneath the city. This process augments the oasis waters already found there and ensures there is always plenty to keep the complex machinery housed beneath the city in working order.

Inside Xuthal itself, the only plant-life grown is that of the black lotus plant. These sinister plants are grown in a series of interconnected pits deep beneath the city in such quantity that it easily doubles what could be found in the entire wilds of Kush. Were it not for the advanced technologies used to cultivate and contain the black lotus, the whole city would quickly become saturated in their dream-causing pollens, rendering it inhospitable to human life.

FAUNA

Since there is no vegetation within ten miles of Xuthal, it follows that there is no animal life

either. The food chain in this desolate landscape is utterly broken and so nothing can survive here. The exception to this rule is found only within the walls of Xuthal itself, where a few scant species of creatures do eek a meagre existence. These creatures are for the most part simple pests, such as rats, insects and the spiders that feed on them. There is one creature present though, that is integral to Xuthal's very existence, a strange blue-winged species of wasp. These angry little creatures infest the same pits as the black lotus plants, ensuring they remain pollinated and healthy as they are meant to do. These strange insects are found nowhere else in all Kush or the northern Hyborian continent and were likely brought with the ancients themselves when they arrived here.

History

Xuthal's history is long forgotten, lost even to the people who dwell there now. What little there is to tell must be surmised by a keen observer and is at best speculation. According to Thalis the Stygian, the ancestors of the people who dwell in Xuthal now once hailed from an unknown land in the east. During their wanderings they discovered this oasis in the desert and reared the great green-stoned city of Xuthal over it. What happened afterward and what caused them to devolve into the decadent people who dwell in the city now is uncertain.

For more information regarding Xuthal's history, see the 'Xuthalan' entry in the 'Denizens' section below.

Features of Xuthal

Xuthal is a huge single-structure city fashioned from green stone that shines like glass. Its mighty walls are 30 feet tall and in places topped with spired towers that rise as high as 20 feet more. Consisting of hundreds of interconnected palaces and courtyards spread over multiple levels, the city is a vast sprawl.

The city contains a number of specific features of interest and these are detailed below.

City Overview

Xuthal (city with village level population): conventional (king); 5,000 sp limit; Assets 2,000,000 sp; Population 808; Isolated (99% Xuthalan, 1% Stygian and demonic entity – one of each).

Authority Figures: King (name unknown), 8th level Xuthalan male noble; Thog the Ancient, a demon lord who dwells below the city and is worshipped by the Xuthalans (see the 'Denizens' section below for details).

Important Characters: Thalis the Stygian, displaced 5th level Stygian female noble who seems to be the only person in the city not addicted to *black lotus blossom* (see the 'Denizens' section below for details).

Others: City guards, 2nd level Noble (x100); guard captains, 3rd level Noble (x3); the people, 7th level Noble (x1), 5th level Noble (x2), 4th level Noble (x3), 3rd level Noble (x15), 1st level Noble (x681).

Notes: Xuthal is one huge sprawling palace, with seemingly endless interconnected chambers

and courtyards. Because of this vast space, the sparse population is often few and far between, giving the place the semblance of an eerie ghost town. Despite this, the city is obviously lived in and has none of the deterioration and dilapidation found in other green-stoned cities. It is not uncommon for visitors to encounter chamber after chamber lit by switched-on *radium gems* (see the 'Treasures' section below for details), well-cleaned flagstones and furnishings or even with fully prepared meals laid out on tabletops. The Xuthalan people can sometimes be found wandering alone through these labyrinthine suites, but are more often encountered congregated together feasting, slumbering or enjoying entertainments.

> *'They manufacture their own food out of the primal elements. They are wonderful scientists, when they are not drugged with their dream-flower. Their ancestors were mental giants, who built this marvelous city in the desert, and though the race became slaves to their curious passions, some of their wonderful knowledge still remains.'*
>
> *Robert E. Howard, The Slithering Shadow*

Technological Advances of Xuthal

Xuthal is a wonder of the Hyborian Age, despite being populated by degenerates half-maddened by lotus dreams. Like most greenstone cities, Xuthal is constructed in a harsh and inhospitable corner of the world where no civilised dwelling

has any business being. It has none of the fundamental trappings of civilisation as most men know them, lacking cultivated fields, sources of trade or any other apparent means of sustaining itself or a populace. Yet here it is. In addition, the basic necessities of life within a city, such as food, water and plumbing are all present and in perfect order, despite the fact that no one among the people ever seems to perform any real work.

How are such things possible? The answer lies in the amazing advanced technologies that the ancient ancestors of the Xuthalans built into the city itself. All the basics of life and more are maintained via vast complexes of machinery buried deep below the city. These machines process and purify water, circulate and clean the air supply and create foodstuffs, clothing, common household supplies and even precious metals from the very elements. Most of these things are performed via some kind of automation that occurs without any input from the populace, while some (such as the manufacture of food and other goods) require the Xuthalans to operate a series of alien-looking devices housed in rune-covered and ornate chambers found below the city. Though these devices require a certain understanding to employ, they are easy to use and take little time. Why these advanced machines still function here and not in other greenstones cities (where they surely must have also once maintained civilisation) is unknown.

In addition to these unseen machines that keep everything in Xuthal functioning, there are a few other examples of advanced technology present in its halls. The most obvious of these and the only one portable are the *radium gems* mounted along the walls of every chamber and corridor. With but a rub of the thumb, these jewels are capable of casting a soft weird light

roughly equivalent to that of a torch. A rub the other direction turns them off. Though these seemingly magical jewels are mounted almost everywhere in the city, they can be pried loose from their mounts and carried as portable light sources. Prying a *radium gem* from its mount requires a pointed tool, such as a knife, and a successful Dexterity check (DC 12). If this check fails by more than five, the gem is damaged and loses its power. For more details concerning *radium gems* see *The Scrolls of Skelos*, Sorcerous Items, Radium Gem.

Gate and Inner Courtyard

Xuthal has but a single wooden gate, 12 feet tall and eight feet wide. It stands closed, but is not barred. Beyond the gate is a broad expanse of paved courtyard bordered on every side by arched doorways that lead into multi-storied edifices built of the same greenish stone as the outer walls. At the centre of the court stands the low curb of a square well, the soft gurgling of moving water drifting from its depths. Strangely, there seems to be no bucket or any other means of drawing up the water, which is some 50 feet below.

It is tradition that one member of the city guard stand watch over the gate at all times (2nd level Xuthalan male noble), though the city has rarely even been visited by outsiders, much less threatened by enemies. Unsurprisingly, the post is dull in the extreme. Coupled with the limited concentration of the Xuthalans, this means that the guard here is more often slumped in the death-like sleep of the black lotus, if he is even present at all, than actually alert and tending to his duties. If such a guard is somehow present and conscious to confront intruders when they enter via the front gate, he is as likely to flee screaming into the chambers of the city as he is

to attack them (50% chance for either reaction). The guard is armed only with an iron short sword.

Wooden Gate: 4 in. thick; Hardness 5; hp 40; Break DC 25; Open automatic. Though closed, the gate is unfastened. Indeed, through there are iron loops for barring the gate, the bar itself is missing.

Palace Chambers

The chambers beyond the archways that border the entrance courtyard are all richly appointed with a vast array of fine tapestries, floor coverings and furnishings. So rich are these decorations that they represent a fortune to most peoples of the world (see the 'Treasures' section below for more details). Most chambers stand empty, though they often show signs of recent occupation, such as prepared food and drink set out, ruffled bed sheets or simply slight impressions upon divans where someone recently rested. Curiously, almost no chamber in the palace is actually furnished with a door, instead being linked to other apartments only by an unfettered archway. The major exception to this are the secret corridors and chambers that run throughout the city (see below), which are always hidden by secret doors.

The palaces of Xuthal are made up of literally hundreds of interconnected chambers spread across five separate levels, three above ground and two below. Each is capable of being illuminated by at least one *radium gem* set into a wall mount, though many are switched off at any given time. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to whether such a light source is currently lit when first encountered and many illuminated chambers stand completely empty. The Xuthalan population tends to congregate together to perform given activities such as feasting, playing or slumbering the sleep of

the black lotus, so they are mostly encountered as a large group in a series of adjacent chambers. There are always stragglers of course, so it is not impossible to encounter wandering individuals in the seemingly abandoned chambers of the rest of the city.

Secret Corridors and Chambers

Xuthal is riddled with a complex network of secret passages and antechambers that connect every corner of the city. In contrast to the richness of the palace chambers, these hidden ways are starkly utilitarian. Originally constructed to serve as utility access ways between the various sections of the city, the complex fell into general disuse as the populace turned completely towards their rank preoccupations. Often dank and musty, these passages obviously see little use.

In fact, the secret corridors and back ways of Xuthal are feared and shunned by most Xuthalans, who are acutely aware that they are prowled by Thog when it decides to leave its sunken dome to look for sacrifices. Nevertheless, a few of the more bold inhabitants of the city do occasionally make use of them, mostly as short cuts between specific limited areas of the city. The only exception to this is Thalis the Stygian, whose fearless and brazen attitude has prompted her to explore every nook and cranny of this secret network. Believing Thog takes what it wants, when it wants and that there is nothing to be done about it, Thalis has embraced the secret side of Xuthal. This secret knowledge and ability to do what others will not only adds to her feelings of superiority towards

the Xuthalans, who she sees as cowed and weak. She has even set up an ante-chamber within the secret halls with various torture devices and accoutrements so that she may explore some of the more debase pleasures taught to her by the priests of Derketo in Luxur with a chosen few that strike her fancy.

The secret corridors can be accessed by using any number of secret portals hidden throughout the chambers of Xuthal's palaces. These are typically further disguised with wall tapestries (Search check at DC 25 to locate; DC 20 from the secret corridor side or if tapestry is pulled aside). Such secret doors open by simply pushing upon them, though they can be bolted closed from inside the secret passage.

Secret Door: 3 inch thick marble, 6-foot high and 5-foot wide; Hardness 8; hp 45; Open automatic (requires only a shove); Break DC 26 (32 if the bolt is in place); door opens into secret corridors. These secret doors have no handles and are instead operated by simply pushing on them (they revolve around a centre pivot). An iron bolt can be thrown in place to seal these doors, though they rarely are. This bolt is easily slipped from the inside, but must be broken to defeat from the outside.

Lotus Pits

In the deepest reaches of Xuthal's lowest subterranean level lies a series of interconnected vaults. The air of these dark chambers hangs heavily with cloying scents and pungent spores, for here are housed the rows of wide-brimmed pits from which the Xuthalans harvest the black lotus plant, gathering the raw extracts needed to concoct their dream-haunted sleeping drugs. These vaults are always tended by a score or more Xuthalans, all of whom seem more clear of purpose and alert than any encountered elsewhere in the city. It is unclear what exactly protects them from the insidious dangers of the numerous black lotuses present here.

Each of the pits housed in these vaults contains 3-7 black lotus plants (see *Conan the Scrolls of Skelos*, Creatures, Black Lotus for details on these horrific plants). Seemingly oblivious to the tending Xuthalans, swarms of blue-winged wasps also flit from pit to pit and the multi-domed hives that cluster among the crawling vines (see the 'Denizens' section below for details on these insects).

Thog s Sunken Dome

At the centre of Xuthal lies a large paved courtyard similar to that which stands inside the front gate. Rather than a well, however, the centre of this courtyard is occupied by a large dome of gleaming alabaster recessed directly into the stones. This dome is worked with intricate patterns of arcane symbols and spiralling whirls, all sheathed in lapis lazuli and purple gemstones. It measures some 25 feet across and rises to a height of 12 feet at its highest point. No apparent entrance points

pierce this dome.

This is the lair of Thog the Ancient (see the 'Denizens' section below), dread deity of the people of Xuthal. The demon lord spends most of its time in the vast, dark chamber that lies far below the dome, suspended in the black waters

of its fetid pool. Here it lies brooding over the mysteries of the cosmos, stealing forth only occasionally to feast upon the people of Xuthal. Thog typically uses the secret trap that opens on the north side of its dome to leave its lair, though it sometimes chooses to crawl through the network of underwater channels that lead from its pool to pits within the antechambers of Xuthal's secret network (see the 'Secret Corridors and Chambers' section above).

No guards ever stand watch here and it is exceedingly rare to ever encounter a Xuthalan in the vicinity of this dome.

Secret Trap: 8 inch thick alabaster, circular trapdoor 7-foot across; Hardness 8; hp 80; Open DC 20 from within (35 from outside, as there are no handholds and it must be pried open); Break DC 38; trap swivels open to reveal a series of iron bars mounted on the inside of the dome and that drop away into the darkness below. This secret trap has no handholds and must be opened via sheer force alone.

Denizens

Unlike most other ancient cities built of green stone scattered across the continent, Xuthal is still occupied by people. The Xuthalans who dwell here now are pale reflections of the great people their ancestors once were. While the ancients who founded Xuthal were mental giants capable of feats so awesome as to seem divine in nature, the people who haunt its halls now are unfocused and decadent drug addicts. With access to wondrous knowledge and science and

unburdened by the labours most of humanity requires to survive, they are nevertheless incapable of saving themselves from the horror that shares the city with them – Thog the Ancient. See below for more details on this new Non Player Character race.

In addition to the Xuthalans, there are two others that dwell in the green-stoned halls of the forgotten city. The first is the monstrous demon lord Thog the Ancient whom the Xuthalans pay homage to in the vain hope that it will spare them. Thog is detailed completely latter in this section. The second non-Xuthalan occupant of Xuthal is a haughty and perverse Stygian noblewoman called Thalis the Stygian. Well versed in the wanton rites of the pleasure temples of Derketo in Luxur, Thalis revels in the power that her unique talents afford her among the men of Xuthal. For many, Thalis is the only real thing enticing enough to make them choose to forego the dreams of the black lotus, if even for only a while. Still, she hungers for a powerful man to share her pleasures with, someone strong, primal and less dream addled than those she dwells among now.

The daughter of a king of Luxur, Thalis was kidnapped by a rebel prince while she was but a young girl. At the head of an army of Kushite bowmen, the prince pushed southward into the wilds of Kush seeking a land of his own, dragging Thalis along as a trophy. Like so many before who dared invade the wild lands to the south, the prince and his army perished in the merciless deserts. Before the last man of them died, he put Thalis on a camel and set her on her way. She wandered in delirium until lapsing into unconsciousness. When she awoke, she found herself in Xuthal where she spent the next decade serving as the sexual plaything of the men of Xuthal. It is only her experiences

in the pleasure temples of Derketo that allowed her to endure her time in Xuthal, latter to turn the tables upon her captors using her wanton talents as a means of advancing her station. For more details concerning Thalis and her complete statistics, see *The Road of Kings* sourcebook, Notables of the Hyborian Age, Thalis the Stygian.

Xuthalan Non-Player Character Race

The Xuthalans are a dying race of decadent people who live in the lost city of Xuthal. They are few in number, but they do not seem to notice or care. Indeed, little beyond their desire to experience the dreams of the black lotus and indulge in every pleasure of the flesh penetrates their drug-addicted minds. Maddened by overuse of these potent drugs, they spend most of their waking moments behaving irrational and confused. They seem to have lost all sense of place within a society and instead live only to indulge their own whims and desires – and what they desire the most is to dream the vivid dreams of the black lotus. More than half their lives are spent in the death-like sleep needed to bring these dreams.

The Xuthalans are all that remains of a once proud race that migrated here from the east, though why they did so is lost to antiquity. These people were advanced beyond the imaginings of even the most civilised peoples of the Hyborian Age and it was through the use of their grand technologies that they raised Xuthal amid such a desolate land. These technologies also fed the populace, improved the station of all inhabitants and allowed them to pursue the noble pursuits of science and study. Yet, despite all their advancements, the ancestors of the Xuthalans were ultimately just men – with all

the weaknesses and susceptibilities than come with mortality. Their cultural undoing came in the form of such a tiny, unassuming thing – a black blossom that grew in the jungles south of the city. This blossom comes from a sinister, partially sentient plant known as the black lotus.

The Xuthalans were intrigued by this unique and deadly plant and turned their powerful intellects towards study of its mysteries. In time, they learned that they could distil its potent poisons to manufacture a number of powerful drugs. Though a few of these were quite beneficial, such as a golden wine that provided astounding healing power and prolonged life which they manufactured from a sub-species of lotus plant genetically extracted from the black lotus, most were highly addictive. Unfortunately for Xuthalan culture, the vivid dreams caused by the most popular of these drugs were extraordinarily pleasurable as well. Easily produced via their advanced understanding of herbalism, most of the people became addicted almost immediately. It was a rapid fall from there.

Xuthalans are unquestionably of eastern blood, with soft yellow skin and slight slants to their eyes. Despite this, the rest of their features seem more Hyborian than eastern. Most have black hair and dark brown eyes. Though they show no sign of it, every Xuthalan left in the city is literally thousands of years old. Since the entire race is sterile, were it not for the life-prolonging qualities of their *golden lotus wine*, they would have died out long ago. All Xuthalans wear purple robes of high quality, often decorated with bright jewels sewn into the hems. Many also wear copious amounts of gold and silver jewellery encrusted with glittering gemstones of every hue.

Culture: Completely absorbed by their need

to experience the dreams of the black lotus, the remaining Xuthalans in the city are oblivious to their impending doom as a people. They dread for their own lives and have a vague understanding of their population's decline at the tendrils of Thog, but they are not cognizant of the fact that this ultimately will result in their extinction as a race. Fatalistic, the few that bother to ponder the situation feel that there is nothing they can do about it at any rate. Instead of taking any real action, they have chosen to deify the demon in the hopes that they can assuage its terrible hunger through offerings and prayer. Deep down they realise this is to no avail and so they seek solace in the dreams of the black lotus.

Names: *The Slithering Shadow* mentions no names of actual Xuthalans, as few indeed are even willing to speak with Conan during his visit. The only meaningful exception is Thalis the Stygian, and she of course is Stygian. However, based upon their racial features, Xuthalans are likely descended from the same bloodlines as the Khitans and so may have names similar to those of that culture (see *Conan The Roleplaying Game*, Characters, Khitan). Then again, if 'Thog' is an example of a Xuthalan name, perhaps their names are more simplistic than the typical Khitan name.

Religion: The people of Xuthal worship Thog the Ancient (see below), a demonic entity that has always dwelt at the oasis of Xuthal. None remembers whether this creature was here when their ancestors first came from the east to found the city, or whether they brought it with them from that strange land. It hardly matters either way, as the dread god dwells here now and sometimes slinks among them searching for sacrifices. In fact, the Xuthalans more fear this monster than revere it. For the most part, their

worship is manifested little beyond a hastily murmured prayer that Thog feast on someone else while the speaker slumbers. Thog itself seems indifferent to this reverence. It moves about the city seemingly at random, and if it heeds the prayers of its followers at all, there is no sign of it.

a +2 racial bonus to all Craft (alchemy), Craft (herbalism) and Knowledge (arcana) checks. Xuthalans are the inheritors of a grand and wondrous science that is beyond the ken of any other civilisation of the Hyborian Age. Though the Xuthalans remember little of how this advanced technology works, such knowledge nevertheless makes them the greatest scientists of the age.

a +1 racial bonus to all Fortitude saving throws against poisons, except *black lotus blossom* (which they always fail) and *black lotus juice* (which they receive a +4 bonus against). Xuthalans constantly drink, inhale or otherwise expose themselves to various dream-inducing narcotics distilled from the black lotus plant. So prevalent is this behaviour in their culture that they are slumped in death-like slumber, lost to such dreams, at least as often as they are conscious. Continuous exposure to these potent drugs has permanently altered their body chemistry, making them resistant to most poisons, neigh immune to those distilled from the black lotus plant itself and yet so susceptible to the dreaming qualities of *black lotus blossom* as to require only the tracest amounts to induce the desired effect.

a Addled. Xuthalans receive a -2 racial penalty to all Concentration, Listen, Sense Motive and Spot checks. So steeped in the

use of their lotus dream-inducing drugs are the Xuthalans, that they have extremely short attention spans. Reality itself is less real to them than their dreams and they find it difficult to concentrate on anything beyond their next drug session.

a Lotus Fiends. Xuthalans are completely dependant upon the dreaming-drugs they distil from the black lotus plant. So powerful is this addiction that few among them can go for more than eight hours straight without its use. They will do literally anything to attain and use the drug and no terror is great enough to make them leave their decadent lifestyle. In no way is this more apparent than for the fact that they refuse to abandon Xuthal, despite being preyed upon by a demonic god whom they dread above all else. In fact, it is obvious to any outsiders who speak with any of them for even a short time, that the overindulgence in the lotus dreaming-drug has caused most Xuthalans to suffer from madness (treat as if afflicted with one of the 'Major Insanities' described in *Conan The Roleplaying Game*).

Background Skills: Craft (alchemy), Craft (herbalism), Knowledge (arcana) and Perform (ritual).

Favoured Class: Noble.

Prohibited Classes: Barbarian, Borderer, Nomad and Pirate.

Automatic Languages: Xuthalan.

Bonus Languages: Stygian.

> *From the black shadows came sounds, incomprehensible and blood freezing. She heard Thalis' voice pleading frenziedly, but no voice answered. There was no sound except the Stygian's panting voice, which suddenly rose to screams of agony, and then broke in hysterical laughter, mingled with sobs. This dwindled to a convulsive panting, and presently this too ceased, and a silence more terrible hovered over the secret corridor.*
>
> *Robert E. Howard, The Slithering Shadow*

THOG THE ANCIENT

Large Outsider (demon)
Hit Dice: 20d8+120 (210 hp)
Initiative: +14 (+2 Dex, +12 Reflex save)
Speed: 30 ft. (6 squares)
Defense Dodge: 26 (-1 size, +2 Dex, +15 natural)
Damage Reduction: 8 (demon lord)
Base Attack/Grapple: +20/+29
Attack: Tentacle slam +24 melee (1d8+5, AP 5)
Full Attack: 2 tentacle slams +24 melee (1d8+5, AP 5) and 2 talons +19 melee (1d8+2, AP 5) and bite +19 melee (2d6+2, AP 8) and spined tail lash +19 melee (1d6+2 plus poison, AP 5)
Space/Reach: 10 ft./10 ft.
Special Attacks: Crushing constriction (2d6+7, AP 10), demonic venom, improved grab, spells
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft., low-light vision, imperceptibility, witchfire transformation
Power Points: 54 (base 50, +4 Wis)
Magical Attack Bonus: +14 (+10 natural, +4 Charisma)
Saves: Fort +20, Ref +14, Will +16
Abilities: Str 21, Dex 14, Con 22, Int 12, Wis 18, Cha 19
Skills: Climb +28, Concentration +29, Hide +23, Intimidate +27, Listen +29, Move Silently +27, Spot +29, Survival +27, Swim +28
Feats: Alertness, Crushing Grip, Great Fortitude, Menacing Aura, Stealthy, Steely Gaze, Track

Environment: The lost city of Xuthal, deep in the deserts of southern Kush
Organisation: Solitary
Advancement: -

Thog the Ancient is the demonic god in flesh that stalks the ancient halls of the lost city of Xuthal. It comes and goes as it pleases, preying upon the fading populace of the once great city. Though the people of Xuthal worship this wicked beast, they fear it more. The thought of Thog stealing through Xuthal's secret ways in search of sacrifices is one of the few things that can shake off the stupor-like lotus haze that most Xuthalans seem to be perpetually experiencing. Despite this, the lotus dream-drugs prove to be stronger even than primal terror, as the people of Xuthal appear incapable of leaving the accursed city.

Thog is a monstrous creature of shadow and mutability. Though obviously large and bulky, it appears indistinct and obscure, even when looked upon directly with a good light source. It is almost as if Thog is impervious to light, appearing only as a blot of black shadow that glides rapidly over the ground. The only detail that stands out with any clarity at all from its cloak of flitting shadows is a huge, misshapen head with a bloated toad-like face. Great pools of murky light stare from this face, each reflecting a cosmic lust alien to mankind.

Combat

Despite the indistinct nature of Thog's appearance, within its cloaking shadows its body is armed with a plethora of bestial weapons. Talons, fangs, needle-like spines and ropey tendrils of writhing flesh all assail opponents who dare resist its terrible hunger. Given the sheer number of these lethal appendages Thog can bring to bear, it is perhaps for the best that its true form is obscured – for surely the mere sight of such an alien monstrosity would be enough to blast the sanity from the most resolute of men.

Crushing Constriction (Ex): On a successful grapple check, Thog deals 2d6+7 crushing damage. It may also use its Crushing Grip feat to alter the specifics of this damage. This attack requires the use of but one of its tentacles (it has two) and does not prevent it from making further attacks with its other modes of attack.

Demonic Venom (Su): The spines of Thog's lashing tail secrete an horrific venom that drives victims mad, sapping their strength, wracking them with excruciating pain and clouding their minds. Injected, Fortitude save (DC 25); initial and secondary damage 1d2 Strength, 1d2 Constitution, 1d2 Wisdom and 1d2 Intelligence.

Improved Grab (Ex): If Thog hits with a tentacle attack, it can start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it gets a hold, it can use its crushing constriction.

Spells (Sp): Thog may cast the following spells as though it were a 20th level scholar. The usual Power Point and other costs apply.

Hypnotism: *Entrance, enslave, hypnotic suggestion, mass hypnotic suggestion, swell, torment*

Necromancy: *Agonising doom, death touch, draw forth the heart*

Prestidigitation: *Conjuring, burst barrier*

Imperceptibility (Su): Thog is constantly surrounded by shifting shadows and its form is impossible to make out clearly. Due to this condition, it is extremely difficult to land a solid blow upon the demon. Thog is always treated as if it were in concealment (20% miss chance against all blows aimed at it, always able to make a Hide check and so forth), even against creatures with darkvision or another means of seeing in total darkness.

Witchfire Transformation (Su): When its hit points are reduced to 25% or less (44 hp or less), Thog may choose to transform itself into a large ball of weird phosphorous radiance as a standard action. So bright is the glow of this form, that any who look upon it must make a successful Reflex saving throw (DC 24) or become blinded for 1d4 rounds. Upon assuming this witchfire form, Thog is treated as incorporeal and has a fly speed of 30 feet with perfect manoeuvrability. Thog is incapable of interacting with the physical world while in its witchfire form (other than to blind those who look upon it) and once so transformed, must remain in this form until resting in the dark waters of its domed lair for a period of one day for every hit point of damage it has suffered.

Treasures

Xuthal is filled with wealth beyond the imaginings of most people of the Hyborian Age. Everywhere one looks are the trappings of opulence – velvet tapestries, satin cushions, gold friezes, soft glowing *radium gems*, fine furs, golden table settings and much, much more. Even the chambers themselves are decorated with the most brazen displays of wealth, with golden bars over the windows, gold and silver chastening worked into even the simplest furnishings and bright gemstones set in patterns to contrast the golden friezes. Xuthal's people reflect this overabundance of wealth too, wearing the finest silks, gratuitous amounts of gem-encrusted jewellery and smelling sweetly of luxuriant perfumes.

Aside from the staggering display of traditional valuables present in Xuthal, there are treasures even more rich and exotic to be had. The easiest to find is the near ever-present *black lotus wine*. The Xuthalans often drink this beverage to bring on a death-like sleep that carries with it the most vivid and prophetic dreams. *Black lotus blossom, black lotus juice, black lotus powder* and even *golden lotus juice* can all also be found in large quantities in the city. But perhaps the most valuable thing found in Xuthal is the *golden wine of Xuthal*, a wondrous draught that can both heal horrible wounds and prolong life. This too can be found in generous quantities within the city, though it is the rarest such treasure.

In the Footsteps of Conan

Conan and his slave girl Natala visited Xuthal during the events of *The Slithering Shadow*. Having wandered the desert for days with little food and water, the pair had come to their wits end. Just as Conan was preparing to put his companion out of her misery, he sited the spires of Xuthal in the distance. The two entered the forgotten city and faced its madness together. They learned of its dreaming citizens and

encountered the beautiful Thalis, who tried but failed to seduce Conan into staying in Xuthal. In turn, Thalis attempted to murder Natala to remove the slave girl as an obstacle to win Conan's affections and instead unleashed the primal fury of his barbarian ancestry. Conan hacked his bloody way through scores of Xuthal's warriors before at last single-handedly battling Thog and driving the demon off in order to save Natala, but not before the monster had carried away Thalis to some nameless doom. Nearly dying from wounds sustained in that epic battle, Conan was healed by a goblet of the *golden wine of Xuthal* that Natala stole for him. Refreshed, Conan led the pair in flight from the insane city.

Unlike most of the legendary ancient ruins Conan visits in Robert Howard's stories, Xuthal is not a ruin at all. Of all the mysterious green-stoned cities found in the Hyborian Age, only Xuthal seems to be both occupied by strange people and still in working order. It is both a throwback to previous epochs as well as a community steeped in the most depraved decadence of Conan's era. Despite its occupants and status as a living community, Xuthal nevertheless has many of the dominant elements found in the other ruins the famous barbarian visits. It is situated in a remote locale far from civilisation, packed with lost treasures and unexplained mysteries, cloaked in an aura of untold antiquity and above all, haunted by a terrible horror left over from previous age. Taken together, these elements mesh to present a fantastic setting whose compelling draw is the very essence of Howard's Conan tales.

Xuthal is the perfect site for an adventure based around the discovery of an ancient culture lost to the world and it is best used in a similar manner to what Howard employs in *The Slithering Shadow*. Due of its remote location in a desolate land, it is also well-suited to use in an adventure that employs the theme of Player Characters being lost and/or stranded without sustenance. This is exactly what drives Conan to visit Xuthal and is a perfectly reasonable method of drawing Player Characters into an adventure set in the city. Of course, Games Master's need not use the same plot device (last survivors of a decimated army) to explain why the Player Characters are lost in the deserts of southern Kush, as there are plenty of reasons for them to be here that may mesh more readily with the events of their specific campaign.

No matter how Xuthal is used by the Games Master, there are certain things that should be considered before doing so. Above all, Xuthal is loaded with an unbelievable amount of treasure. This kind of wealth can easily make the Player Characters too powerful and permanently unbalance a campaign. Howard himself seems acutely aware of this problem and on numerous occasions created circumstances that forced Conan to decide on a course of action that ultimately results in the wealth slipping through his fingers. Given this, Games Masters should follow Howard's lead and plan beforehand how this situation will be handled. Player Characters should be presented with situations that bring hard choices and terrible consequences. For example, in order to escape with a sack full of unbelievable riches from Xuthal, perhaps one Player Character must decide to pull up the rope (to which the treasure is tied) with which his companions were about to make their escape from Thog. If he does so, his companions will surely face doom at the talons and tentacles of the demon lord. If he instead leaves it and provides assistance, perhaps they can make their escape after all, though the treasure is likely then lost. Whatever the circumstances ultimately

turn out to be, create the situation and then allow the players decide what will be. Whatever they choose, the outcome should be a memorable one to be sure.

The wealth aside, there is also the matter of when an adventure is to be set in Xuthal. Having the Player Characters take the place of Conan for an adventure that recreates the events of *The Slithering Shadow* is completely reasonable. For Games Masters that really wish to create as close a recreation as possible, the slave girl Natala should be added to the Player Characters' party before they begin such an adventure (her statistics can be found in *The Road of Kings*, Notables of the Hyborian Age, Natala, the Brythunian Slave Girl) under whatever circumstances he sees fit. If the Games Master runs a campaign that follows the Conan cannon more closely, Xuthal is still very much a viable adventure site even after Conan's visit. The Xuthalans remain unchanged, though there are far less of them now due to Conan's rampage. In this case, though Thog was defeated, it is strongly suggested that it had merely withdrawn to lick its wounds. If so, it will have had plenty of time to recover and become a menace to the people of Xuthal again. As for Thalis, she is likely slain, devoured by the cosmic hunger of Thog before Conan battles the demon. However, there are disturbing hints in the story that perhaps this was not her ultimate fate, or at least not her only fate. It is possible that Thog had mated with her instead and should the Games Master choose this scenario, there may also be the loathsome offspring of this union to contend with. If so, it is suggested that the Spawn of Dagoth Hill template found in the *Conan The Roleplaying Game* rulebook be used to create this new horror.
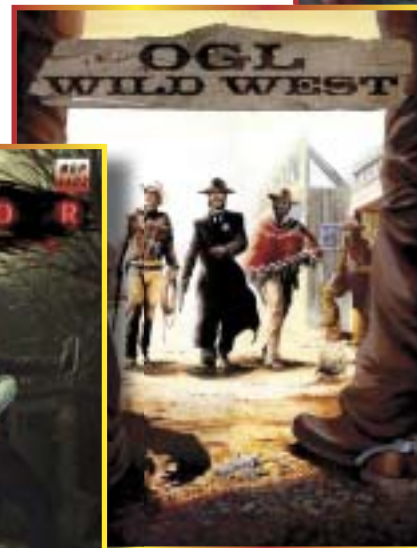
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Inside The Chainmail Bra

Fey Boss

Why do girls game?

What I'm about to reveal will make me unpopular - make me seem misogynistic - cynical - possibly even antagonistic. But all the same, it's true, and that is why it's unforgivable.

Listen carefully - it's no secret. Why, really, do girls get into gaming? It's not exclusively the domain of pasty nerds and geeks who wet themselves at the thought of contact with a real girl. But it's still not a bastion of raw studs who would love nothing more than to sweep girls off their feet with a night of passionate romance, either. Most often, the boys who play these games start out as raw hunks not of muscles but of insecurity, greasy in skin and temperament, short on social skills and more afraid of any girl not a direct blood relative than of the mythical foes their characters might face.

This isn't meant to rag on the male of the species. The truth is that most girls in their adolescence aren't much better - they just HIDE it better. Your average teenage girl has skin thinner than gold leaf and more prone to spots than a Dalmatian with German measles. She has close girlfriends of like temperament ranging in number from one to one thousand, with whom she'll keep constant company while proclaiming in girl code, 'B-F-F'. (Best Friends Forever, if you aren't fortunate enough to have been in on this code before now.) Then, whenever

with a different one or more of these friends, she will promptly and in great depth tear up the absent friend - in enough detail to make a harpy cringe, and with such a mix of fact and fiction as to make a tabloid editor shudder with joy. You think the Punic War had bloodshed? Wait until two girls find out what they've been saying about each other - right up to the shrieks, the weeping, the slammed doors and the tearful declarations of never speaking to one another ever again! 'Ever again' often lasts perhaps two weeks, when they return - to tear up another absent friend and blame the entire schism on her back.

So with all that to offer, why wouldn't any girl take refuge among the pizza boxes, snack packaging, screens and books and dice? Surely some girls might retain some sanity through the teenage years. But no, I tell the truth. Sadly - shockingly - it just isn't so. Girls start gaming - return to the tables, the papers and dice, not so much as an escape to sanity, but for a glimpse of being someone else. Someone popular. Someone able to benchpress an ogre, to say nothing of the maths teacher. What every single one of those girls, bent over their characters, with dice in hands and earnestly poring over the character advancement tables or experience charts or other appropriate texts wants is popularity! If the captain of the football team starts falling madly for her, she'll turn up

less and less to games - she'll spend all her time in the bleachers, watching a very different and much more physical sort of game.

Of course, if she were the sort of girl to catch his eye, she'd likely never have started gaming in the first place - not then. While I concede that it is just barely possible for a four star model with the sort of blinding smile to be used in toothpaste adverts and a figure made for dancing on a pole to be introduced to gaming and take to it, the fact is that a non-gaming social life will and usually does take precedence over the chance to roll dice while slaying imaginary pirates. What's that? You're fighting the space raiders of Saturn tonight? Well, it's tempting, I admit, but Johnny's taking me out to a Michelin-rated restaurant tonight. You have cheese puffs? Well, hold on, I'll call Johnny and tell him I can't make it! In your dreams.

But this only applies to adolescents, surely? Don't be ridiculous. This isn't just me being mean - I've been as guilty of it as anyone. I know. When you grow up, all those nasty, petty, mean-spirited and downright grubby urges don't just go away. Ever walked in on a hen party? Adult women are teenaged girls in disguise - all those gossipy moments add up and while they might be phrased more diplomatically, they still exist. Usually they're less diplomatic, with a tongue sharpened on the steel of experience.

Instead of schoolyard twittering, it becomes office politics. I've seen more games broken up due to grown women being unable to share the unofficial role of alpha female; in one case, it was an adult man who couldn't face that a female player apparently had bigger balls than he did, when it came to party leadership. Sometimes a man can be at least as much a spiteful cat as any woman.

Adult women have just as much reason to try to escape into games as teenaged girls might - more, in fact. Battle of the bulge getting you down? Slip into a superheroine. She's got the perky figure that can knock them dead. Not only can she get away with skin-tight spandex, she does - while fighting crime! No one ever criticises her for doing a fashion don't. Bad hair day? She never has them. She can tackle a runaway train full of radioactive materials and her hair still comes out as if she just left the salon. Didn't finish the piles of laundry, dishes, correspondence?
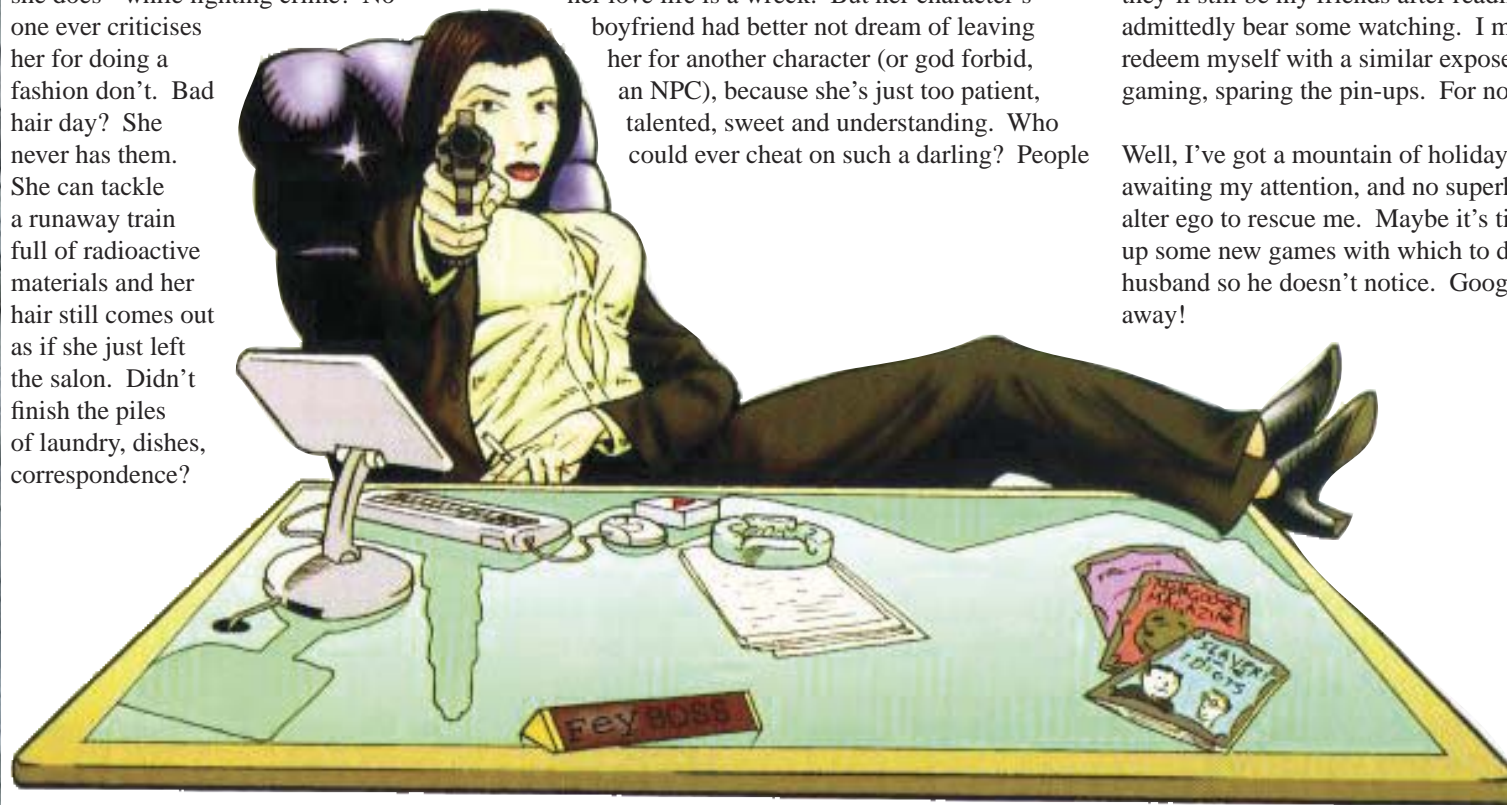
She single-handedly cleaned up three rivers, a corrupt politician, a criminal organisation AND rescued a basket of kittens from a watery grave - before breakfast. It's consoling to know that no matter how far behind we might fall, our characters at least are just about to hit level eighteen.

But what about drama - pathos - angst? Sadly, too many women want exorbitant amounts of all of the above in their roleplay, and it usually goes round and round in the same patterns without ever getting resolved, or only at the expense of the angsty one's character somehow being perfect, blameless and exceptionally stoic. Her mother was an abusive witch and that's why her love life is a wreck. But her character's boyfriend had better not dream of leaving her for another character (or god forbid, an NPC), because she's just too patient, talented, sweet and understanding. Who could ever cheat on such a darling? People

who play these sorts of characters, regardless of the characters' gender, are usually female and also usually display an unwillingness to take responsibility for fixing their problems in real life, let alone truly delving into their characters' messes.

It's all part and parcel with the desire to escape - and escape isn't ALL bad. No one can deal with daily life without some occasional relief, and as outlets go, it's better than putting away a litre of gin every night, or being reduced to the fishnets and stiletto heels at the street corner to support a drug habit. Women can be wonderful people - some of my best friends are women, and most of them were even born that way! Whether they'll still be my friends after reading this will admittedly bear some watching. I may have to redeem myself with a similar expose of men in gaming, sparing the pin-ups. For now, though?

Well, I've got a mountain of holiday dishes awaiting my attention, and no superheroine alter ego to rescue me. Maybe it's time to look up some new games with which to distract my husband so he doesn't notice. Google, take me away!

No Room for Error

Spacer Prestige Classes for the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game

Bryan Steele

During the chaos of a ship-to-ship engagement, between the burning lasers and the roaring missiles, it takes a certain type of person to stay cool… to keep their head under that type of stress. These few know that a single mistake, a single miscalculation, even a single *error in judgment* could cost the lives of an entire crew. These people are military spacers. Most sentient peoples of the 23rd century are used to having the void encapsulating them as they sail through space - but it is these rare folk who dare to battle within it.

Fighting in space does not always take place from behind a firing console or inside a cockpit. Some of the most brutal and tide-turning events happen up close and personal - boarding parties. Highly skilled marines fill breaching pods until they practically overflow, just ready to burst out into a ship and take it at gun and knifepoint. These brave men and women are separated from their own deaths by a thin magnetic seal and the strength of their own wits.

Only the toughest grunts this side of the Rim qualify to 'ride the void' - and only the luckiest and most skilled survive.

Breaching Marine

Hard as nails, cold as vacuum and as relentless as gravity itself, breaching pod marines are the first wave to blast through an enemy hull and take the first steps into hostile territory. Sometimes called 'ten second titans', the average lifespan of a marine taking first breach into an enemy ship is 10.2 seconds. They are expected to push in as far as it takes, through any (and all) obstacles, to set up a secure (the term being used extremely loosely depending on the breach) position for the rest of the unit to enter safely behind them.

Breaching marines use high yield, heavy-duty assault weaponry - heavier than some GROPOS equivalents. They are trained to fight in zero-G, ranged and melee combat in the knowledge that no set plan will stand unchanged once that maglock sets and the breaching charge burns through. There is a saying among Earthforce breaching marines: 'Start praying when you hear the charge blow, and if you make it all the way to Amen, you might just live to see tomorrow.'

Requirements

To qualify to become a Breaching Marine, a character must fulfil all the following criteria:

Abilities: Con 13+
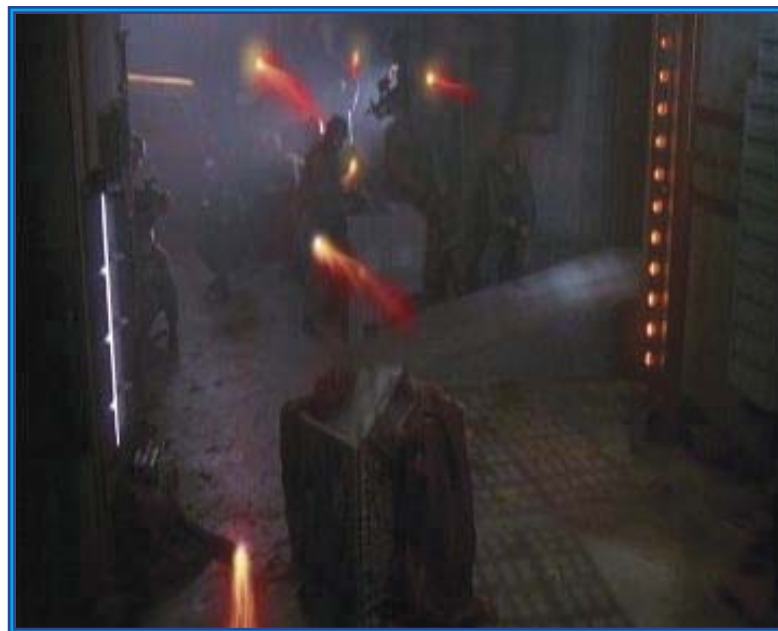
Skills: Concentration 8 ranks, Survival 8 ranks and Technical (any) 8 ranks

Feats: Improved Initiative and Nerves of Steel

Class Skills

The Breaching Marine's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are: Balance (Dex), Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (spacecraft) (Int), Listen (Wis), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis), Technical (any) (Int) and Tumble (Dex).

Skill Points at each level: 2 + Int modifier

The Breaching Marine

Class Mfwfm	Cbtf! Attack Bonus	Gpsu! Save	Sfg! Save	Xjnm! Save	Tqfdjbm
1	+1	+0	+1	+1	Marine Weapons, Breach Reaction, Zero-G Training
2	+2	+0	+1	+1	
3	+3	+0	+1	+1	Take Cover +1
4	+4	+1	+2	+2	
5	+5	+1	+2	+2	Take Cover +2
6	+6/+1	+1	+2	+2	
7	+7/+2	+2	+3	+3	Storm as One
8	+8/+3	+2	+3	+3	
9	+9/+4	+2	+3	+3	Take Cover +3
10	+10/+5	+3	+4	+4	Unyielding Assault

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Breaching Marine prestige class.

Hit Points Per Level: 3

Marine Weapons: At 1st level, the Breaching Marine is thoroughly trained with the use of specialty weaponry designed for a Marine's use. They gain the Weapon Proficiency: Marine feat for free. For examples of such weaponry, see below.

Breach Reaction: At 1st level, the Breaching Marine is taught how to properly board a possibly hostile ship through the use of a breaching pod or magnetic umbilical. Because of this, the Marine receives a +4 circumstance bonus to Initiative and +2 circumstance bonus to attack rolls on the initial round of combat following a successful breach.

Zero-G Training: At 1st level, the Breaching Marine learns how to deal with combat in a situation where the artificial gravity of a target ship could be non-functioning. Breaching Marines ignore any penalties to their Dexterity for low- or zero-gravity situations.

Take Cover: Marines must take advantage of the slightest defensive positions they can when entering an unknown area. At 3rd level, the Breaching Marine learns to take better advantage of local surroundings and add a +1 bonus to their Defensive Value while taking any bonus from Cover. This bonus increases to +2 and +3 at 5th and 9th levels respectively.

Storm as One: At 7th level, the Breaching Marine learns to use his fellow squad mates (or happenstance allies) and their actions for support of his own. The marine may postpone his own action in combat in favour of garnering support from a friendly character. Acting on the other character's initiative, the Breaching Marine may apply one of the following affects - as long as both characters attack the same target.

- Ignore up to half of the target's Defence Value bonus from Cover.

- Add +1 to damage rolls for each friendly character acting on this initiative at the same target.

- Add your Base Attack Bonus to all Intimidate skill checks against your target this round.

Note: Multiple Breaching Marines may use Storm as One on the lowest initiative if they choose to.

Unyielding Assault: At 10th level, the Breaching Marine is a veteran ship assaulter and an unstoppable juggernaut in the heat of battle. For a number of rounds equal to the marine's Constitution score modifier, the marine's Damage Reduction (including that gained from armour) is half again (round up) higher. This modifier goes into effect on the first round of any combat automatically.

Tactical Saboteur

Marines can only do so much damage with guns and knives when aboard an enemy vessel. They could kill every enemy crewman, take every officer hostage and still the ship would be a hazard to their brothers-in-arms out in the void. For this very reason, they bring along skilled

men and women that do their best fighting not behind the sights of a gun, but at the hilt of a wrench or at the keys of a control panel.

Tactical saboteurs go along in small numbers with the marines, steering the breaching pod to a particularly useful hull point in order to disable or control the sensitive system targeted within. By playing a dangerous game of electronic chess while relying on their marine brothers to protect them from overwhelming odds, they can turn an enemy vessel against its own. Sometimes, even turning its own weapon systems against itself.

Requirements

To qualify to become a Tactical Saboteur, a character must fulfil all the following criteria:

Abilities: Int 13+

Skills: Concentration 8 ranks, Computer Use 8 ranks and Technical (mechanical) 8 ranks

Feats: Nerves of Steel and Skill Focus (computer use)

Class Skills

The Tactical Saboteur's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are: Climb (Str), Computer Use (Int), Concentration (Con), Hide (Dex), Jump (Str), Knowledge (any) (Int), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Profession (any) (Wis), Search (Int), Speak Language (None), Spot (Wis) and Technical (any) (Int).

Skill Points at each level: 4 + Int modifier

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Tactical Saboteur prestige class.

Hit Points Per Level: 2

Splice Mastery: At 1st level, the Tactical Saboteur knows how to splice his way into any electronic or mechanical shipboard system for which has even a vague knowledge. He receives a +1 per level bonus to all Computer Use and Technical skill checks made to disable or assume control of a spacecraft system. This bonus may only be applied to spacecrafts of his own species' design (although this is changed at higher levels).

Zero-G Training: At 1st level, the Tactical Saboteur learns how to work while in a situation where the artificial gravity of a target ship could be non-functioning – sometimes disabled by their own hands. Tactical Saboteurs ignore any penalties to their Dexterity for low- or zero-gravity situations.

No Sweat: At 2nd level, Tactical Saboteurs keep their calm in even the hottest firefights raging all around them. They receive a +4 bonus to all Concentration skill checks they are required to take while taking non-combat actions during combat.

Species Mastery: Starting at 2nd level, and every two levels thereafter, Tactical Saboteurs may begin to add the workings of alien species' to their repertoire of known systems. They may choose a single spacefaring species in which they have had technical contact with (handled/ observed their spacecraft technology, one way or another). From now on, the Tactical Saboteur can use the ability Splice Mastery with this race as well as his own.

The Tactical Saboteur

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+0	+0	+1	+0	Splice Mastery, Zero-G Training
2	+1	+0	+2	+0	No Sweat, Species Mastery
3	+2	+1	+2	+1	
4	+3	+1	+2	+1	Species Mastery
5	+3	+1	+3	+1	You've seen one system…
6	+4	+2	+3	+2	Species Mastery
7	+5	+2	+4	+2	
8	+6/+1	+2	+4	+2	Species Mastery
9	+6/+1	+3	+4	+3	
10	+7/+2	+3	+5	+3	…you've seen them all!, Species Mastery

Combat Tactician

At the head of every operation, from fortress sieges to boarding parties, lies a central hub of information, a pipeline of good ideas and tactical choices that might spell victory or disaster. They are a mix between computer jockey and drill sergeant, barking orders in response to floods of data pouring in from outside feeds. Their minds have to move three steps faster than those they are supposed to direct, and they must be prepared to switch gears at the slightest outside stimuli.

In each tactician lies a war room of the mind, with pieces laid out that are rarely even aware of the others. Their squad members must trust their judgments, and follow through with sometimes seemingly absurd orders - because only the tactician really knows what to make out of the chaos of combat.

Requirements

To qualify to become a Combat Tactician, a character must fulfil all the following criteria:

Abilities: Int 13+, Cha 13+

Skills: Concentration 8 ranks, Computer Use 8 ranks and Knowledge (combat tactics) 8 ranks

Feats: Data Access and Nerves of Steel

Class Skills

The Combat Tactician's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are: Bluff (Cha), Computer Use (Int), Concentration (Con), Diplomacy (Cha), Forgery (Int), Gather Information (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Knowledge (any) (Int), Listen (Wis), Profession (any) (Wis), Read Lips (Int), Search (Int), Sense Motive (Wis), Speak Language (None), Spot (Wis) and Technical (any) (Int).

Skill Points at each level: 4 + Int modifier

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Combat Tactician prestige class.

Hit Points Per Level: 2

Basic Orders: At 1st level, the Combat Tactician can use his knowledge of the situation to steer those in his command - or anyone who might listen. With a successful Knowledge (combat tactics) skill check (DC 15), the Combat Tactician can give a bonus equal to his Charisma score modifier to all to-hit rolls, Hide, Spot and Search skill checks this turn for a number of friendly characters up to his Intelligence score modifier. These characters have to be in hearing range (audio contact does count) and be willing to accept his tactical suggestions. This requires the Combat Tactician's full attention and takes a full-round action.

Combat Feeds: At 1st level, the Combat Tactician receives a constant flow of combat information from his special data-feed unit (see equipment section, below). While using data-feed unit, he gains a +2 circumstance bonus to his Initiative checks. This bonus increases to +4 and +6 respectively at 3rd and 5th level.

On Second Thought: At 2nd level, the Combat Tactician can catch his own tactical mistakes, seeing the possible outcome in his mind, before they actually occur. A number of times per

You've seen one system…: At 5th level, the Tactical Saboteur has a vast knowledge over spacecraft systems and can splice into familiar ones with unerring ability. If he has ever successfully made a Computer Use or Technical skill check concerning a particular spacecraft's system, he may add +5 to any further Computer Use or Technical skill checks involving that particular system on that particular spacecraft.

…you've seen them all!: At 10th level, the Tactical Saboteur's knowledge over spacecraft systems is a more of an instinct than a talent. If he has ever successfully made a Computer Use or Technical skill check concerning any system on a particular spacecraft, he may add +5 to any further Computer Use or Technical skill checks involving any system on that particular spacecraft, or any spacecraft like it. *Example: Deiter, a level 10 Tactical Saboteur, has spliced into the firing controls on an Earthforce Hyperion, named the Isis, before. He will always receive a +5 bonus to do so on any Hyperion from now on.*

Advanced Orders, the Combat Tactician can delay the on-set bonuses gained from a successful Basic Orders for up to three rounds, allowing him to include himself (gaining the bonuses from his own tactics!) for free as part of the effected friendly characters. Characters can only benefit from one set of Orders (Basic or Advanced) per round.

Master's Gambit: At 5th level the Combat Tactician can concoct truly grandiose tactical plans that could boggle the minds of those involved if they knew truly how elaborate they were. He now has no limit to the number of friendly characters he can affect with uses of Basic and Advanced Orders (although everyone effected must still be in audio contact with the Combat Tactician).

gaming session equal to his level in this Prestige Class, the Combat Tactician can force anyone currently gaining a bonus from Basic Orders, Advanced Orders or Master's Gambit to re-roll a failed attack roll, saving throw or skill check.

Advanced Orders: At 4th level, the Combat Tactician has a knack for multi-step plans that unfold over a short span of time. With

The Combat Tactician

Class Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+0	+0	+1	+0	Basic Orders, Combat Feeds +2
2	+1	+0	+1	+1	On Second Thought
3	+2	+1	+2	+1	Combat Feeds +4
4	+3	+1	+2	+2	Advanced Orders
5	+3	+1	+3	+2	Combat Feeds +6, Master's Gambit

New Feats

Breachpoint Freak (General)

You live for the rush of stepping over that magseal into hostile territory, those first few seconds of smoke and PPG fire is your bread and butter. You are at your best when breaching.

Prerequisite: Breaching Marine level 2 or higher

Benefit: You gain a +2 to all Initiative checks and Saving Throws during the first five rounds of any breaching/boarding action into hostile territory.

Voidrider (General)

Someone needs to pilot those assault shuttles and breaching pods through the dangerous battlefields of space. You are one of those people. Lives often depend on your skill at the helm to survive and your superiors depend on it for success.

Prerequisite: Spacecraft Proficiency, Veteran Spacehand

Benefit: You may double the effects of the Veteran Spacehand feat while piloting a breaching pod or assault shuttle. In addition, you may take a Reflex save versus the to-hit roll of any incoming fire while piloting these vehicles to evade damage.

Hacker (General)

You are a master at splicing into foreign computer systems and the electronic roadways are your playground. Making them do your bidding is second nature to you.

Prerequisite: Data Access, Hobby (computer use)

Benefit: You may take 10 on any Computer Use skill check in one minute instead of the normal time. Also, you also can re-roll one failed Computer Use skill check once per session.

Telepathic Feeds (Telepath)

Using your telepathic abilities, you have an additional data feed that literally comes to you at the speed of thought itself. This gives you another dimension in which to plan your tactical decisions.

Prerequisite: Combat Telepathy, Far Telepathy, Combat Tactician level 1 or higher

Benefit: You may add your P-Rating to the bonuses that the Combat Feeds special Class Feature grants you.

New Equipment

Marine Decksuit: Used primarily by breaching marines in service to Earthforce and several private security firms, the Decksuit is a flexible under-armour layer designed to be worn beneath the highly protective armour utilised by military marines. It has a self-contained air supply (three hour canister at base of spine), communications link (1-mile range) and auto-seal anti-leak fibres.

Marine Decksuit: Cost 600 cr.; Weight 15 lb., DR 1

EF-14 Heavy Rig Particle Gun: A starfighter class weapon attached to a full body harness, the EF-14 is capable of laying down a stream of superheated particles capable of shredding organic and metallic targets with ease. It is powered by a backpack power supply. It takes two hands to wield and special training to fire correctly. The rig attaches to most current armours and takes a great deal of the weight of the apparatus off the shoulders of the user.

EF-14 Heavy Rig Particle Gun: Cost 2,400 cr., Damage 3d8, Critical 20/x2, Ammo 8, Range Increment 70 ft., Large, Weight 30 lb. (unharnessed) / effective 12 lb. (harnessed), Type Energy

Note: Requires the Weapon Proficiency: Marine. Backpack power supply will self-charge from inner cells, but takes one hour to do so.

Drazi SolarFlare Cannon: The Drazi pride themselves on their martial prowess and nothing gets their blood pumping like a boarding action. Designed specifically to cause lower damage that lingers long enough for melee-minded Drazi to dispatch, the SolarFlare cannon hurls short-ranged spheres of concentrated energy. These spheres have a liquid consistency and take a few seconds to burn off a target - giving the firer and his squadmates a chance to close in on them.

Drazi SolarFlare Cannon: Cost 2,000 cr., Damage 2d6 upon impact/1d8 on following round, Critical 20/x2 (impact only), Ammo 10, Range Increment 20 ft., Large, Weight 40 lb., Type Energy

SolarFlare Cannon Reloads: 125 cr.

Note: Requires the Weapon Proficiency: Marine.

Splicing Module: This mini-computer decryption device is worn on the wrist/forearm of those who need to splice into a network or system quickly and efficiently, particularly those in the field of sabotage. It is a rectangular instrument strapped to the forearm, with several self-rewinding splicing clips and a small readout screen on the back of the hand. With the right keystrokes and proper training, a proficient splicer could hack into nearly any computer system. This equipment can also be

used for a great deal of 'on the fly' computer work, but confers no significant bonus other than its handiness. Because of their notorious uses, splicing modules are illegal on most computerised stations and craft. Due to the study of Minbari technology during the Earth-Minbari War, there are a rare few old military modules that also have the attachments to link up to Minbari computers (literally, an alien system-type) seamlessly.

Common RE-7 Splicing Module: Cost 450 cr., Weight 2 lb.

RE-2 Splicing Module including Minbari-Technology Adapters: Cost 1,500 cr., Weight 2.5 lb.

Data-Feed Unit: This combination earpiece/HUD eyecup gives a licensed tactician a constant flow of data from several sources - securecams, maintenance bots, internal security, squad-based recorders, and so on. With proper training, someone could gain immense amounts of on-the-spot information to be utilised as they see fit. Rumour has it that some 'eavesdropper' data-feed units have been created by terrorists and mercenaries, actually tapping in through a series of simple wide-band scans into *any* streaming data system. If these eavesdroppers really do exist, they would be a priceless commodity to anyone wishing to play outside regulations.

Common Data-Feed Unit: Cost 250 cr.

'Eavesdropper' Data-Feed Unit: Cost upwards of 5,000 cr., requires a Technical (electrical) skill check (DC set by Games Master depending on local security) to activate properly.

1 Collapsed

2 Sabotaged

3 Destroyed

4 Disappeared

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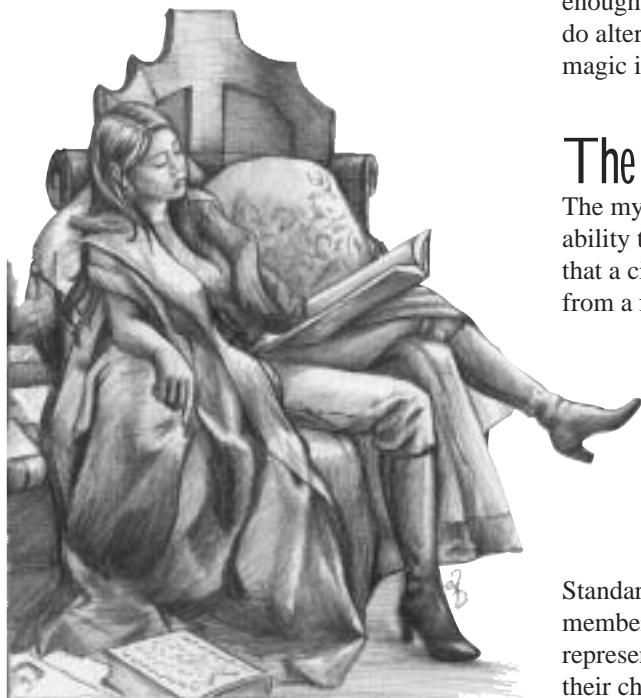52-54 Cricklade Road
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Scripture Magic

The Written Language of Magic

Alejandro Melchor

In magic, words are power, and writing gives a shape to those words, fixing their form so that they defy oblivion and become permanent. Writing is an integral part of magic both arcane and divine, as it is an activity with its own inherent magic, which few can grasp now that it is used to convey mundane messages as well as to preserve and hide secrets. Spellcasters of all stripes can attest to the power of writing when a few scribed characters are capable of containing a summoned fiend, or when drawing a symbol in the air can drive creatures to despair and madness, but few of them specialise in scripture magic, the practice of using writing's own magical nature to channel their power.

Scripture magic is a slightly different way of looking at spellcasting. Those who learn it change their methods slightly, becoming unique casters that exploit a secret hidden in plain view and, while their techniques do not change enough to create a new kind of spellcaster, they do alter sufficiently to alter their view of how magic is performed.

The Nature of Script

The mystery and power of scripture lies in its ability to convey meaning. For many barbarians, that a civilised person can ascertain a message from a few scratches in a wall is nothing short of magic, and the convoluted codes and diagrams of arcane scripture is a test for the minds that would learn to wrest the meaning of the letters. Magic scripture relies on signs and symbols; abstract scribbling that *means* something beyond its appearance.

Standard writing is a contract in a culture; all its members at one point agreed on what a symbol represented and then taught that meaning to their children and so written languages evolved.

Magic scripture, on the other hand, is not an agreement. Magic symbols are there and have been there since magic first came into the world; they channel magical power through their contours and their meaning already exists, waiting for spellcasters to discover it.

Normal Uses

Most spellcasters are already familiar with magic scripture. Wizards in particular have a very intimate relationship with the craft of putting pen to paper because their magic depends on that which they can write down in their spell-books; however, anyone who knows the *read magic* spell or has ever cast magic from a scroll is cognisant of the power of written symbols.

A spellcasters uses the Scribe Scroll feat to write down spells in such a pre-cast form as to need only the final words of the spell pronounced for the effect to go off. In effect, the spellcaster is pouring power into every traced symbol and word, weaving the strands of magic with the written words in order to create an effect.

Asides from scrolls, another common use of magical writing is the scribbling of protective wards in a summoning circle. In this case, the symbols have power of their own because of the nature of outsiders, whose mercurial nature as extraplanar creatures make them vulnerable to

the stability and permanence of magical writing.

Less common, but equally powerful uses of writing are the *symbol* spells, which encase a powerful effect inside a written rune of power.

Some magical traditions include the creation of magical tattoos, which are the same as magical writing except that they choose to use flesh instead of paper or stone, and imagery that encases a magical meaning instead of abstract signs. Tattoo magic is very rare and only happens in very particular nations.

Scribed Spells

Spellcasters gain access to the benefits of scripture magic by taking the Scribe Scripture feat, representing a more intense training in the art of writing and a shifting of the character's spellcasting focus.

Scribe Scripture (Special)

You concentrate the power of your magic through written symbols.
Prerequisite: Scribe Scroll, Spellcraft 5 ranks, spellcaster level 3rd.
Benefit: The spellcaster has access to scripture magic abilities and is able to pour spell slots and experience points into a magical writing to activate its effects.

Casting scribed spells is essentially the same as casting it through normal methods, Spellcasters that prepare their spells, like wizards, clerics, druids and experienced rangers and paladins, prepare their spells normally but, rather than casting the majority of the spell, they write it down in a scroll or a strip of paper. Spontaneous casters like sorcerers and bards cast a scribed spell by tracing the symbols in the air as part of the spell's somatic component. Spellcasters have several options available to them when they cast scribed spells.

Replace Components: By infusing a written scripture or traced symbols with the spell's power, spellcasters can forego of certain spell components, as they are using the power of writing. Spellcasters that prepare their spells eliminate the need of material components without a specific cost. The money that would go into buying a spell component pouch instead goes towards buying paper and ink that will be used for the same purpose. Metamagic effects are written down as alterations of the spell's 'code' and work as usual. To cast a spell from a scribed strip, the spellcaster pulls it out and completes the spell by casting its somatic and verbal components. The strip of paper burns as the symbol channels the spell's power through it.

Spontaneous casters tracing the symbol in the air are using the magic scripture as a complement to the spell's somatic component. When they are doing this they must still use material components to activate the spell's resonance. Scribing a spontaneous metamagic effect works as usual, with the spellcaster taking additional time to alter the spell's 'code' in writing. As an option, spontaneous casters may also scribe down a spell's material component in a strip of paper or another material, scribing the same spell several times as they choose it again and again because of their ability to cast spells without preparation.

It is important to note that a scribed spell strip is *not* a scroll; the spellcaster spends his own spell slots when casting a spell from a scribed component. This use of scripture magic is mostly cosmetic.
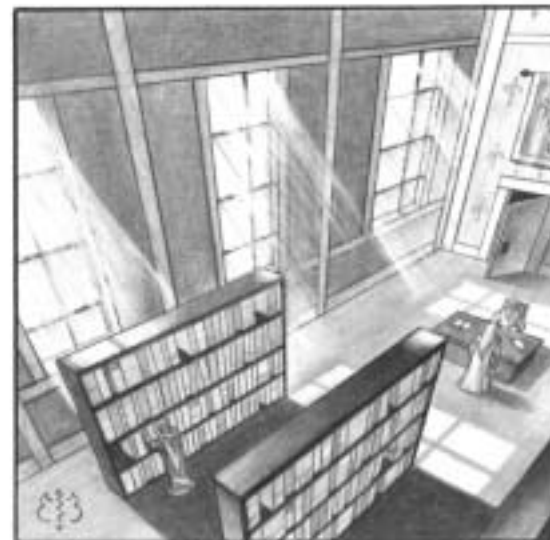
Replace Focus and Costly Components: Scripture already acts as a focus of sorts for spellcasters who take the time to study the secrets of writing and with a little extra effort, they may replace more unique spell components: costly components and foci. To replace a costly component, the spellcaster must have available an equivalent component that is not as expensive or costs nothing at all. For example, if a spellcasters wishes to use *identify* and does not have a pearl with him, he may use any other gem in his possession to make up for it. The same goes for foci and other special components, like *iron body*'s iron golem piece; for the scripture mage, a simple scrap of iron will do.

The next part of replacing special components lies in the preparation or triggering part of the casting. The spellcaster scribes the magic characters describing the component or foci so that the magic is 'fooled' into thinking the replacement is the actual needed component. The character spends a number of experience points equal to the spell's level multiplied by

his caster level, his life force empowering the magical scripture and activating the words' meaning.

Know Power Sigils: By deconstructing the writings of various spells, the caster recognises the written elements that form the core of various spells and effects. For every 4 ranks in Spellcraft, the caster automatically learns a power sigil that he may apply to any spell he knows (see below). He may learn additional sigils to the ones he gains by increasing his Spellcraft ranks by spending 3 skill points per sigil.

Magic Diagram: When drawing a magic diagram as part of a *magic circle* spell intended as a trap for summoned creatures, the caster can scribe particularly potent sigils using magic scripture, thus empowering the circle. The original DC for a Spellcraft check to draw the diagram is 20. For every 2 points that the caster increases the Spellcraft DC, the DC of the creature's saving throw to resist the summoning spell and the DC of its Charisma check to break free of the circle both increase by +1. As usual, the caster may take 10 or take 20 when drawing the circle with magic scripture, if time is not a problem.

A normal magic diagram allows a caster to include *dimensional anchor* prior a summoning attempt. A magic diagram complemented with scripture magic allows the caster to include *any* spell in his repertoire as part of the diagram's enchantment. By increasing the diagram's Spellcraft DC by 1 per level of the desired spell, the caster may infuse the diagram with that spell's power. The included spell must be one the caster is able to cast himself rather than from a wand, scroll or other magic item. The caster draws the diagram, scribing the desired spell's runes and designations and then casts the

spell targeting the diagram. Thus empowered, the diagram can discharge the included spell on the summoned creature on every of its attempts to escape, up to a number of times equal to the caster's key ability modifier (Intelligence for wizards, Wisdom for divine casters, or Charisma for spontaneous casters). The creature can make a saving throw against the spell as normal. The included spell must be the sort that can target the creature to be summoned normally; area spells are contained within the diagram, but any spell whose area would normally exceed the magic circle's circumference has a 5% chance per spell level of disrupting the circle, allowing the creature to escape.

Negate Save: If a target is held helpless, the spellcaster can take his time in casting a spell by scribing it onto the target's skin. It takes him one minute per spell level to do this, and he casts the spell normally through the inscribed symbols. The target suffers a -4 circumstance penalty to any saving throw against the spell as the scribed symbols channel it into his skin.

Permanency: The power of writing lies in giving ephemeral concepts a stable, permanent form. The same goes for magic scripture. This effect only works for objects or areas, which the caster surrounds with the appropriate runes, symbols and other signs of magic scripture. The caster must still be able to cast the spell he wants to inscribe permanently and spends an amount of experience equal to 500 XP per spell level. He makes a Spellcraft check (DC 20 + spell level) in which he cannot take 10 or take 20. 0th level spells are treated as 1st level spells but cost half the experience points to inscribe. If he fails the check, he cannot scribe the spell correctly and loses half of the experience being invested. If successful, the spell activates inside the area and is now permanent.

In addition to the spells that can be made permanent with the *permanency* spell, a caster may inscribe permanently the following spells: 0th level spells: *light*; 1st level – *hold portal, grease, obscuring mist, hypnotism, magic aura, silent image, feather fall;* 2nd level - *protection from arrows, fog cloud, continual flame, darkness, minor image, levitate;* 3rd level - *dispel magic, magic circle against chaos/evil/good/law, stinking cloud, suggestion, gentle repose;* 4th level – *confusion, hallucinatory terrain;* 5th level - *mage's private sanctum, mirage arcana, passwall;* 6th level - *guards and wards.*

Spell Circles: When a spellcaster is out of spell slots or wishes to save them for future use, he can use scripture magic to cast a spell. This is a lengthy process, however, as the caster is basically doing what he does when preparing a spell: casting the main part of it and then casting the trigger. It takes 10 minutes per spell level to scribe the necessary spell circle, whose characters must be set down on a stable surface and not disturbed during the casting. The characters makes a Spellcraft check (DC 15 + spell's level) with the result being apparent only at the end of the preparations; if the scribing was successful, the caster activates the spell by suffering a point of ability damage per three spell levels (levels 1st through 3rd deal one point, levels 4th through 6th deal two, etc.). The character may cast a metamagic spell this way, but he suffers additional points of ability damage; he suffers one point per two levels by which the metamagic effect raises a spell's level (feats that increase the level by +1 and +2 cause an additional point of ability damage, while those that increase it by +3 or +4 deal two additional points). The ability damaged is the one the caster uses for his spellcasting (Intelligence for wizards, Wisdom for divine casters or Charisma for spontaneous casters).

Spelltrap: Similar to a spell circle, a spelltrap is a scribed spell waiting to be triggered. Instead of casting the spell normally, a character casts it into a small collection of potent runes and symbols, spending a spell slot as necessary and making a Spellcraft check (DC 10 + spell's level). If the Spellcraft check fails, the spell is wasted. Tracing a spelltrap takes one minute per spell level. When it is finished, the symbols flash for an instant and then fade, becoming nearly invisible. A Spot or Search check (DC equal to the caster's Spellcraft result) reveals the faintly glowing symbols, while a *detect magic*, *arcane sight*, *see invisibility*, *true seeing* and similar spells and abilities reveal them automatically, although it requires a *read magic* effect to identify them for what they are. A creature passing within 5 feet of the spelltrap triggers it, unleashing the spell as if the caster had cast it from that point. A spelltrap remains in place for one hour per caster level or until triggered. While the spelltrap is in place, the spellcaster may not prepare or cast a spell using the spelltrap's expended slot; it is considered 'invested' until it is triggered or dissipates on its own. The caster may dispel a spelltrap at any time, at any distance simply by using the invested spell slot to prepare or cast another spell.

Spellmark: Just like a spelltrap, a character may scribe the writings of a spell onto an ally's skin. This ability has the same requirements and duration as a spelltrap, but in this case, the recipient of the spellmark may trigger the spell at will by touching the trigger rune and giving a mental command. The caster decides where he scribes a trigger rune, with the most common locations being the back of the hand or the neck. Only spells with a range of touch or affecting a specific target may be tattooed onto an ally's skin.

Power Sigils

A power sigil is a rune, symbol or collection of scribed strokes that echoes strongly with the power of magic. It is the true writing of a concept or magic element and affects all magic it is applied to. To use a power sigil, the caster includes it when preparing or casting a spell with the Scribe Scripture feat. To empower the sigil, the caster must devote a spell slot of equal, lower or higher level in addition to the slot for the spell being altered (see the sigil descriptions). Sigils act as metamagic feats, altering a spell's effects subtly and in a controlled manner, and spontaneous casters must take double the casting time as per a normal metamagic spell when they are including a sigil into a casting.

Sigil Descriptions

The following are possible sigils that a caster may learn in his study of magic scripture.

Blasphemous Sigil

Spell Slot: Same level.
Effect: A blasphemous sigil somehow resembles the symbols of all the evil deities, or at least that is what it reminds anyone who sees it. When a caster uses a blasphemous sigil with a spell that deals hit point damage, half that amount becomes unholy damage. In addition, good creatures targeted by a spell with a blasphemous sigil suffer an additional +2d6 points of damage.

Elemental Sigils

Spell Slot: 1 higher.
Effect: There are four different elemental sigils and each one must be learned separately. The four elemental sigils are: air, earth, fire (different from energy sigil), and water. By spending a slot of one level higher than the spell receiving the sigil, the caster can empower it with that element's properties as follows:

✦ **Sigil of Wind (Air):** The sigil makes the spell travel on the wings of elemental air. When placed on a spell with a range other than touch or personal, said range is doubled and, even if a verbal component is required, it is not heard (this sigil does not defeat magical silence as the Silent Spell feat).

✦ **Sigil of Stone (Earth):** The sigil makes the spell gain solidity and strength. When placed on a spell that causes hit point damage, any target that suffers damage must make an additional Fortitude save (DC same as the spell's) or be stunned for 1 round, and dazed for 1d4 rounds afterwards.

✦ **Sigil of Flames (Fire):** The sigil makes the spell quick and hungry. When placed on a spell with an adverse effect on the target, said target must make two saving throws, and must succeed in both to avoid the spell's full effect, 'putting out' the spell's magical flames.

✦ **Sigil of Waves (Water):** This sigil makes the spell flow around its target with hidden force. After casting a spell, the caster may delay its activation up to a maximum number of rounds equal to twice his key ability modifier (Intelligence for wizards, Wisdom for divine casters and Charisma for spontaneous casters). During the delaying rounds, the caster may move and perform standard actions, but may not cast any other spell. For every full round that he delays the casting of the spell, its saving throw DC increases by +2. If the character suffers damage or condition that would interrupt the casting of a spell, he makes a Concentration check with the normal DC and, if he fails, he loses the spell. The character may release the spell at any time up to the maximum amount of time that he can build up its strength.

Energy Sigils

Spell Slot: Same level.
Effect: There are five different energy sigils and each one must be learned separately. The five energy sigils are: acid, cold, electricity, fire and sonic. By spending a second slot of the same level as the spell receiving the sigil, the caster may convert all hit point damage caused by the spell into energy damage of the corresponding sigil. Energy sigils only work with spells that cause hit point damage. The spell gains the descriptor of the energy sigil being used; losing any other energy descriptors it had previously.

Enmity Sigils

Spell Slot: 1 lower
Effect: There are 32 different enmity sigils and each one must be learned separately. Each of the 32 enmity sigils corresponds to one of the favoured enemies that a ranger may choose. When the character casts a spell empowered by an enmity sigil against a creature corresponding to it, it may have one or two effects. A spell dealing hit point damage deals +2 point of damage per die rolled; any other effect increases the spell's DC by +2. An enmity sigil's bonus to the DC stacks with the bonus from the Spell Focus feat.

Mask Sigils

Spell Slot: 0th level slot.
Effect: This simple sigil is otherwise very useful in battles between spellcasters. There are eight different

mask sigils and each one must be learned separately. The eight mask sigils correspond to the eight schools of magic. By spending a 0th level slot, the caster can make a spell have a magic aura corresponding to the sigil's school. A Spellcraft check to identify the spell's aura must beat the DC by 10 or more in order to pierce the mask, otherwise, a spellcaster identifies the masked spell as one belonging to the sigil's school. Counterspelling targeted at the fake school invariably fails.

Piercing Sigil

Spell Slot: 1 higher.
Effect: A spell with a piercing sigil as part of its components makes the caster glow at the moment of casting. If the spell strikes a creature with spell resistance, the character is entitled to a second caster check to defeat it should the first one fail.

Sacred Sigil

Spell Slot: Same level.
Effect: A sacred sigil somehow resembles the symbols of all the good deities, or at least that is what it reminds anyone who sees it. When a caster uses a sacred sigil with a spell that deals hit point damage, half that amount becomes holy damage. In addition, evil creatures targeted by a spell with a sacred sigil suffer an additional +2d6 points of damage.

School Sigils

Spell Slot: 1 higher.
Effect: There are eight different energy sigils and each one must be learned separately. The eight school sigils are: abjuration, conjuration, divination, enchantment, evocation, illusion, necromancy and transmutation. By spending a second slot of the same level as the spell receiving the sigil, the caster may cast spells of the same school as the sigil as if he were one caster level higher.

Sigil of Mercy

Spell Slot: 1 lower.
Effect: This sigil shines powerfully with a soft blue light when it is used on a spell, colouring the entire effects of the spell. By spending a slot of the same level as the spell receiving the sigil, the caster may convert all hit point damage caused by the spell into nonlethal damage. The spell retains all the original descriptors and energy types, and any feat or effect that modifies the amount of damage works normally.

Target Sigil

Spell Slot: 1 lower.
Effect: When the sigil disappears as the spell is completed, it infuses the spell's energy. If it successfully affects its target, the sigil manifests upon it and attracts the energy of the next spell aimed in its direction. The target suffers a -4 penalty to the next Reflex save he has to make against a spell or spell-like ability, and suffers a -2 penalty to AC against the next spell with a touch range. When the sigil successfully attracts a spell, it vanishes and the target no longer suffers the penalties. If the sigil is affecting a spell with an area or that affects more than one target, the caster decides on which the sigil will manifest.

The Fear Files

Horrors heaped upon horrors - new supernatural threats for OGL Horror

Morgan Davie

Bearer Of Wasps

Medium Outsider
Hit Dice: 8d8 + 8 (44 hp)
Massive Damage: 12
Initiative: +4
Speed: 30 ft.
Defence: 14 (+4 natural), touch 10, flat footed 14
Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: +8/+9
Attack: Slam +9 melee (1d6+1)
Full Attack: Slam +9 melee (1d6+1)
Space/Reach: 5 ft. x 5 ft./5 ft.
Special Qualities: Darkvision 60 ft.
Weaknesses: Vulnerability (fire) 10
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +6, Will +7
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 11, Con 12, Int 15, Wis 13, Cha 13
Skills: Balance +8, Bluff +9, Diplomacy +9, Escape Artist +8, Hide +10, Jump +9, Listen +9, Move Silently +10, Sense Motive +9, Spot +9
Feats: Improved Initiative, Stealthy
Horror: Madness 15

It stepped back into the shadows but in that moment I saw it, tall and naked and covered with abscesses, and over its papery skin crawled a legion of wasps.

Evidence:
X **Search (DC 25):** Footprints, very light, barefoot, but they seem to be made by someone with severe deformities.

X **Search (DC 30):** Flakes of a strange papery substance were found near the prints; they seem to be from a wasp nest.

Research:
X **Knowledge (Earth & Life Sciences) (DC 25):** The wasp nest uses some materials that have never previously been identified.

X **Research (DC 25):** The African peoples had a legend of a demon that would come for them with wasps as its heart and a hum as its voice…

The Bearer of Wasps is a vaguely humanoid creature made of a grey papery substance and honeycombed with thousands of tiny holes and recesses. Within its body, alien wasps make their nest.

The Bearer of Wasps is not native to this reality. It has crossed over from some other place, and brought its wasps along with it. The wasps by nature expand into the surrounding environment, creating new colonies as they go, but the Bearer of Wasps remains hidden, following their progress from afar.

The Bearer of Wasps is intelligent, and while it can make no language it can read human body language effectively and, when it chooses, can respond in kind. It is a profoundly alien creature nonetheless. While it gains greatest satisfaction from nurturing the spread of its wasp plagues, it often pursues secondary interests in the area where the swarms are loose. Its goals are often obtuse; it has a particular interest in stealing dogs, driving them mad with pain then breaking their necks, for example. Sometimes its goals are more obvious, particularly when it falls into the service of a greater power, or when it feels under threat and targets those responsible.

Colonising Swarm

Swarm of Fine Vermin
Hit Dice: 4d8 (18 hp)
Massive Damage: 1
Initiative: +4
Speed: 30 ft.
Defence: 14 (+4 Dex), touch 14, flat footed 10
Base Attack Bonus/Grapple: N/A
Attack: Swarm (1d6)
Full Attack: Swarm (1d6)
Space/Reach: 10 ft. x 10 ft. / 0 ft.
Special Qualities: Colonise, Darkvision 60 ft., Distraction, Swarm traits, Vermin traits
Weaknesses: Vulnerability (fire) 5
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +5, Will +1
Abilities: Str 1, Dex 18, Con 8, Int 0, Wis 10, Cha 10
Skills: Hide +9, Spot +5
Feats: None
Horror: Panic 12

They were crawling all over her body... over her throat, over her hands... and they were crawling in and out of her mouth and nose, in and out, and I wondered how many of them had crawled inside her and what they were doing in there...

Evidence:

✗ **Search (DC 20):** A number of dead wasps lie scattered at the scenes of both deaths.

✗ **Treat Injury (DC 20):** A large number of wasps were found inside the cadaver, crawling through the lungs. They were still alive and still quite vicious. They must have crawled in the victim's mouth and down his throat.

Research:

✗ **Knowledge (Earth & Life Sciences) (DC 15):** The wasps are an entirely new species, with a poison unlike any other wasp poison known.

✗ **Research (DC 20):** In West Africa in the 1960s a similar plague of wasps was recorded. It was contained only because every village in the region was burned to the ground as part of the burgeoning civil war.

Colonise (Ex): A colonising swarm seeks out fresh corpses and turns them into nests and breeding grounds for more of their kind. The swarm burrows deep into the victim and prepares it for use, a process taking 1d4 hours. Then the swarm releases pheromones indicating the colony's readiness for a queen. When a queen arrives and settles in, the corpse becomes a full breeding site, ultimately producing a new swarm and new queens to go and activate other colonies.

Distraction (Ex): Any living creature that begins its turn covered by a swarm must make a Fortitude save (DC 11) or be nauseated for 1 round. Using skills that require patience or concentration requires a Concentration check (DC 20).

Swarm traits: Swarms deal automatic damage when they occupy the same space as a target. The swarm is immune to all weapon damage. Reducing a swarm to 0 hit points or lower causes it to break up. Swarms are never staggered or reduced to a dying state by damage and they cannot be tripped, grappled or bull-rushed.

Vermin Traits: The vermin gains a +5 species bonus on Fortitude saves to negate the effect of Massive Damage. The vermin is immune to mind-affecting effects.

A colonising swarm is made up of alien wasps, brought into this reality by a Bearer of Wasps. They exist only to reproduce and spread without limit through populated areas.

Using the Bearer of Wasps and the Colonising Swarm

These are best used in a 'spreading crisis' adventure, where one strange wasp attack becomes the first of many and suddenly there is a major crisis in place. The hospital morgue becomes a swarming, buzzing hive of wasp activity; dead bodies lie in the street, twitching with the insect activity going on within. Lurking in the centre of it all is the Bearer of Wasps, the origin of the trouble, either exulting in the damage done or using it as cover to pursue another agenda. Destroying the Bearer does not remove the swarms, but the swarms will never be dealt with unless the Bearer is killed.

The Sons of the Kraken

A Terrifying Terrorist Threat for the Judge Dredd Roleplaying Game

Marc Farrimond

O ver the years there have been many who have tried to bring the mighty Mega-City One to its knees, from invading East-Meg forces to the renegade robots controlled by Nero Narcos. Even within the Justice Department itself there have been attempts to bring down the city in one way or another, with the insane Chief Judge Cal almost wiping out the city in 2100. Of course, all have failed in their goal; although often at a great cost to the city itself taking a toll in lives, resources and more.

There is a threat to Mega-City One and the lives of every man, woman and child that call it home, a threat that is growing like a cancer on the seedy underbelly of society, gnawing away at the foundations that hold up the great city. Its goals are almost alien to the everyday citizen, but if fulfilled could perhaps spell the greatest disaster that the city has ever faced.

The Sons of the Kraken is a strange cult that began to surface around four years ago in Sectors on the eastern edge of Mega-City One, bringing with it an appetite for destruction and chaos beyond belief. The first recorded incident of Sons of the Kraken activity was the sabotage of the Resyk centre in Sector 79, causing a massive backlog of cadavers on the belts that at first seemed like any other random act of destruction, until Justice Department investigations turned up very disturbing evidence.

The investigating Judges discovered that a leak in a reactor plant in Sector 79 had left over 200 dead. The bodies, as usual, were sent to Resyk for disposal, but the investigation revealed that the corpses never made their way through the belts. They had been intercepted along the way; the act of sabotage was nothing but a cover for the activities of a mysterious new terrorist group.

Justice Department officials were at a loss as to what anyone would wish to do with over 200 irradiated cadavers, but where soon to find out. An outbreak of a mutated flu virus in Sector 220 claimed the lives of over 7,000 citizens in the course of a week. When Med Division conducted its own investigations into the possible causes it was discovered that the virus had been artificially created. A tri-d vid slug was sent to Mega-City News, one of the city's most watched news and current affairs programs, and claimed that the virus that was running rampant in Sector 220 was the an act of retaliation by the Sons of the Kraken, and that they would not rest until all of the world trembled in fear at the very mention of their name.

Within a few short months the symbol of the Sons of the Kraken began to appear all over Mega-City One, a blood red squid on a black background. Wherever this symbol is to be found, chaos and disaster are very close behind. The Sons of the Kraken use terror tactics; however, no one has ever determined their long-term goals which seem to include nothing beyond total anarchy, destruction and the taking of life.

The Justice Department has a vast array of files and information on the actions of the Sons of the Kraken but has experienced great difficulty in actually combating this new terrorist threat. Its leaders are all but unknown; the few members who have been caught alive always end up dead within a few moments, taking their own lives in much the same way as a blitzer and often taking anyone who is unfortunate enough to be close by. One thing is for certain: the sheer terror that the Sons of the Kraken bring with them means that they are something that needs to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Wally Squad judges working undercover on the station of Atlantis have tried desperately to infiltrate the ranks of this murderous cult, and almost everyone who has succeeded has been found brutally murdered, often in a very messy way, before they can get in too deep and discover the real power behind the cult.

Modus Operandi

Over the past four years the tentacle-like tendrils of the Sons of the Kraken have begun to be felt all over Mega- City One, Atlantis and reaching out towards Brit-Cit and even as far away as Luna-1, with the cult using its terror tactics to destabilise governments and seed fear and terror into the hearts of the citizens and criminals alike.

The Sons of the Kraken preach that the end of the world is about to arise; only those fit to survive are those willing to take the end into their own hands and embrace chaos and destruction. They say that when the sun sets into the polluted depths of the Black Atlantic and the sky turns blood red, then the Great Black Kraken Ta'Rak will arise and all will be wiped from the face of the Earth, leaving only her chosen few to inherit all.

One of the first things that the cult will do when entering a new area is to infiltrate local criminal organisations and replace key members with those of their own choice. From there they are able to turn the organisations in on themselves and sow the seeds of doubt and mistrust, eventually bringing the resources of the organisation under the manipulative

control of the All Father, the ruler and leader of The Sons of the Kraken. Often criminal organisations will be unaware that they are often acting on the orders of the Sons of the Kraken,

and their ill-gotten gains are only going to fuel terrorism and acts of violence against the people of Mega-City One.

So where did the Sons of the Kraken come from? There are many theories under consideration by the Justice Department, with everything from a Cursed Earth eco-terrorist group with Sov backing to disgruntled members of the Brit-Cit aristocracy. The real truth may never be known; like the tendrils of the Kraken itself, the cult is deep rooted and dangerous. The extent of control the cult has over the criminal underworld on Atlantis is causing almost all out war between the cult and the crime lords that have ruled the station almost exclusively for years. In Mega-City One the Sons of the Kraken have reached far into the underbelly and it is even rumoured that they are smuggling mutants in from the Cursed Earth to aid in their goal for domination.

All evidence of the headquarters of the cult seems to point towards the service station of Atlantis, the largest of the six service plexes that line the Trans-Atlantic Tunnel from Mega-City One to Brit-Cit. The judges of Sea Watch work tirelessly to discover any links between the station and the terrorist activities of the Sons of the Kraken.

Watch Commander Walden has her hands full with the basic running of the station of Atlantis; when her overstretched Sea Watch judges are facing some of the most devastating weaponry known to mankind, it comes down to a game of cat and mouse as Sea Watch work on tip-offs from Wally Squad infiltrators or candy girl narks, hoping to take a cultist alive and find out just who is behind the acts of terror that are gripping the station.

There is no telling where and when the Sons of the Kraken will strike, but when they do it will always end with the loss of life in some form or another. The cult uses terror to undermine shipping lines, public transport and even food supplies, often polluting them using viral agents or genetically modified strains of bacteria that will eat through the seals of the Trans-Atlantic Tunnel itself. No one is safe, citizen or judge, and with every attack the all too familiar symbol of the red squid is displayed like a proud battle standard wherever the cult strikes.

Nobody is completely sure as to just why the Sons of the Kraken have chosen Atlantis as their main staging area, some believe that it is the proximity to both Mega-City One and Brit-Cit and the Trans-Atlantic Tunnel that passes through it, making it an ideal location to transport drugs, weapons and more. Others feel that it is the very polluted waters of the Black Atlantic itself, where the monstrous creatures known as Black Kraken have been known to drag even the massive hyper-tankers to a watery grave. It is certain, however, that there are many

on Atlantis who would follow the Sons of the Kraken and each time a sect of the Cult of the Kraken is quashed by the judges of Sea Watch, another rises up to take its place.

Drugs also play a major part in the Sons of the Kraken enigma. Drug labs have been found on Atlantis, and all over Mega-City One, creating some of the most addictive designer drugs ever faced by the Justice Department and responsible for over a third of all criminal activity on Atlantis in one way or another. Purple Haze is the clubber's drug of choice, allowing the goers to the club capital of the world to dance all day and party even harder, but it comes at a price. Overuse of Purple Haze can result in long term blindness, brain damage, fits and even death, but most clubbers will swear by this drug and are willing to pay out anything to get a fix so they can party harder, regardless of the costs to their health and the threat of the Iso Cubes for being caught with a prohibited substance.

The Justice Department comes down very hard on anyone found in possession of Purple Haze with very lengthy spells in the cubes for possession and even longer sentences for those found supplying the narcotic, but the drug still remains one of the most popular with juves in recent years.

Danse Macabre is another designer drug from the labs of the Sons of the Kraken. When used, it sends the user into a drug fuelled frenzy, increasing their physical attributes and making them all but unstoppable in combat. Recent outbreaks of carjacking in Sector 128 and 190 have been put down to the use of this drug, with the users often able to withstand injuries that would cripple or even kill a normal person. Danse Macabre releases dopamine into the blood stream and saturates the body with endorphins

and adrenaline, making the body work twice as fast as normal and kicking in the feeling of euphoria that accompanies a dopamine rush; additionally, it dulls the pain receptors in the brain to injury allowing a body to take more punishment than normal. It is quite possible for a cultist hooked on Danse Macabre to survive being shot several times, fall from a great height and even set on fire; however, the effects of the drug do not last for long. Danse Macabre is notorious for wearing off suddenly allowing the real trauma to kick in and overwhelm the users central nervous system. This is usually enough to bring on a massive heart attack in addition to any other injuries the user may have suffered.

Prostitution and numbers running are also slowly becoming dragged into the net of the Sons of the Kraken, with more and more candy girls and prostitutes becoming hooked on Purple Haze and thus fuelling the perpetual circle of user, dealer and manufacturer.

Whenever a crime has been committed by the Sons of the Kraken, the symbol of the red squid will be left as a grisly calling card. This is often accompanied by a tri-d vid slug sent to the media to claim responsibility. In recent years activities of the Sons of the Kraken have become commonplace on tri-d news broadcasts, with hardly a week passing without some form of activity being reported on news zines.

Infiltration into the cult by undercover judges from both Brit-Cit and Mega-City One have lead to very little concrete evidence, revealing only that the cult operates in cells. Each cell contains between five and 20 members, making it difficult to track down all the cells in any given city. The cell structure operates under the instruction of a cell Bishop, who in turn answers only to the High Father - the current leader of the cult. To date, no undercover judge has been able to get close enough to discover the true identity of the High Father, though several high ranking Bishops have been captured, even if the self destruct devices implanted in their brains make their capture all but futile.

Cultists

In a bizarre turn of events, a recent development has turned the Sons of the Kraken from a criminal terrorist organisation into a fully fledged church, with members found in almost all the mega-cities around the world and as far away as Luna-1. Of course, the self styled Church of the Kraken is an illegal organisation but there are those who feel the need to join, venting their anger and frustration onto an unseeing public.

Many members of the Church of the Kraken are easily recognisable by their horrific disfigurements, almost always self inflicted. These mutilations range from limb amputation to ritual scarification even, in some cases the use of powerful bio-acid compounds to remove all distinguishing features, such as fingerprints or even the face itself. Many of the members of the Church of the Kraken are already psychologically disturbed before they seek out the cult and once they have undergone initiation they will become little more than unpaid killing machines, all assured a place at the side of the Great Kraken Ta'Rak when the end of the world comes.

Black Market

The Justice Department is well aware of the fact that Sons of the Kraken are responsible for supplying illegal weapons to the criminal element of Mega-City One, but it does not stop

Name: Sons of the Kraken

Business Type: Illegal Cult

Size: 200,000+

Visibility: 10   **Activity:** 5   **Loyalty:** 10

Territory: Mega-City One, Brit-Cit, Atlantis, Luna-1

Income: 30 million

Members: Numerous

Resources and Allies: Church of the Kraken (20,000+ Members worldwide), Judge Templeton (Sector Chief, Sector 134).

See the *Rookie's Guide to Criminal Organisations* for details of criminal organisations and business fronts.

the flow of weapons reaching shuggy halls to make their way into the hands of criminals and other lowlife.

Of course, everything is not as it always seems in the strange world of Mega-City One and there is far more to the Sons of the Kraken than even the Justice Department is aware of.

The Sons of the Kraken is the brainchild of Jack W. Warner, the CEO of Hampson & Hampson - one of the worlds most respected businessmen. Warner had insider information that the closest

rival of his company Haynes Industries was in fact a legitimate cover for one of the largest criminal organisations in Mega-City One and it was beginning to encroach on Brit-Cit, the home of Hampson & Hampson for over three centuries. Warner tried to bring down the rival company from the inside without success. After much debate with his subordinates, an alternative plan was hatched to bring about the end of Haines. The Sons of the Kraken was in fact a very unsuccessful B movie that Warner had seen as a child, and over a century later he resurrected the name and built up the mythos around a fictional cult. It was then a simple case of building up a force that could infiltrate and eventually take over smaller criminal organisations and running them from the inside out. Senior figures within the Justice Department have also been singled out by the Sons of the Kraken and there are at least four very senior and prominent judges and one sector chief in the employ of the cult.

and his associates and is beginning to become something of a Frankenstein's Monster, turning on its creator and even Hampson & Hampson seems vulnerable to attack from the Sons of the Kraken. This very fact has helped throw the Justice Departments of both Brit-Cit and Mega-City One off the real investigation, leaving them at a loss as to the real powers behind the throne of the Kraken.

Using the Sons of the Kraken

There are many ways a Games Master can seed the Sons of the Kraken into their adventures and campaigns, either citizen or judge based. A few are detailed below.

Judges

Infiltration: The Player Characters are hand picked to go undercover and try to infiltrate the cult and learn as much as they can without being discovered before reporting their findings back to the Justice Department. This can be made all the more difficult when corrupt judges within the Justice Department may have access to the fact that the Players Characters are conducting an investigation. The Player Characters may have

their hands full when confronting the cultists and have to put aside personal grudges in order to bring down the society as a whole.

Crack Down: The Player Characters are among other teams of judges who are sent into the sector's bad area to flush out members of the Sons of the Kraken or the Church of the Kraken and bring them to justice. This may involve running battles with a foe with devastating weaponry that could well tip the balance and make the hunters become the hunted.

Investigation: Perhaps the easiest way to involve your Player Characters with the Sons of the Kraken is to have them investigate terrorist attacks in the area in order to bring the culprits to justice. The more they dig the more they will become noticeable to the eyes and ears of the cult and become a target themselves.

Citizens

Cleaning up the streets: The Player Characters are hired by a criminal organisation with a lot of clout such as the Hussain Mob (the criminal organisation behind Haynes Industries) to take out as many members of the Church of the Kraken as they can. For each member they eliminate they will be handsomely rewarded and they will be given a wide range of weaponry and equipment to help with their cause.

On the run: The Player Characters have inadvertently attracted the attention of the Sons of the Kraken and as such are marked targets. They will find it difficult to hide anywhere in the city and must work out a way to throw the cult off their backs or come to some other idea that will save their skins.

Things could not have worked out better for Warner and following the assault on Sector 79 the cult grew in status, gaining more and more members and when the Church of the Kraken was created it took the whole thing to a new level never expected by Warner and those on the board of Hampson & Hampson trusted with the information of the cult. Now the cult is developing a mind of its own and has far outgrown the wildest expectations of Warner

The Jonny Nexus Experience

Rebooting Your Campaign, Part I

This article is something of a first for me. For some seven years now I've written about the 95% of times when my attempts at roleplaying go horribly, dysfunctionally wrong. But in this article I intend to do something different.

I'm going to describe one of the 5% of moments where it actually went right. I'm not sure that it will be particularly funny, or even entertaining, but unlike practically everything else I write there's a semi-finite possibility that it might actually be useful.

* * * * *

The Problem

For my Thursday group I run a superhero campaign set in mostly modern-day Cornwall, in which Bubba, Bog Boy and Mark play three Cornish superheroes recruited by 'Mother' (a.k.a. God); together they form a superhero team called Kordh Kernow (Clan Cornwall).

The campaign has a tone that's generally silver age and heroic and aims for a style similar to the old Marvel comics I grew up reading. (Although I'll admit that featuring – in 'Issue 5' – a male-on-male mass golden showers orgy scene featuring a glass table, a vertically mounted video camera, some pieces of bacon on a string[1], and my Universe's equivalent of Captain Britain did leave me open to accusations of hypocrisy; accusations that my players – who'd been forced to created old-fashioned, goody-two-shoe superheroes – enthusiastically levelled).

Now by and large I was very happy with the way the campaign was going. I wasn't getting round to doing sessions as often as I'd like (I'm ashamed to say that this is still the case), but I was happy with the setting, happy with the story-lines, happy with the characters that Bubba (Cousin Jack, a.k.a Lord Giles Peter Carminow), Bog Boy (Redemption, a.k.a. Jason Tremain) and Mark (Huntsman, a.k.a. Dylan Penhaligan) had created, and very happy with the way those characters were interacting with the setting and the plot.

So what was the problem?

Well, we'd basically gone off the rules system.

We were using a system called Golden Heroes, which – for those who don't know – was a system that had been produced by Games Workshop in the mid-1980s and was quite successful for a few years before being dropped. It was very much a contemporary of 1st edition AD&D. By that, I don't mean that the rules themselves were similar (although you did generate attributes by rolling 3D6 and roll a D20 to attack), but that they had a similar ad hoc, but charming, feel.

It had: no proper skill system; no universal task resolution mechanism; no method of rolling against an attribute; a whole raft of separate, and different, rules subsystems and a random method of character generation that was good for making players think outside of the box (they had to think up an origin story that could explain the powers they'd rolled) but could often result in them playing 'Captain Improbable'.

But what it did have was a kick-ass combat system that delivered fights that felt like comic book fights, and – having GMed a previous Golden Heroes campaign in the late 80s – I knew already how it worked. (And when you're a rules illiterate who's attempting to GM people who could kindly be described as rules chefs, a system which you know and they don't is an attractive prospect). And anyway, there weren't many other superhero systems then, and most of the ones that did exist were tied to particular published comics. I did consider Blood of Heroes, which is the old DC Heroes system without the DC, but then I remembered that I'd used that system in a superhero campaign I'd run some years previously (the Mars campaign I described in the previous issue)… and hated it.

So when I started the campaign I plumped for GH. The character generation actually worked out pretty well, but over time both myself and the guys started to get dissatisfied with certain aspects of the rules, namely

the fact that outside of combat, it didn't really have any rules; and given that my game was pretty combat light and involved a lot of investigation, this was quite a problem. I tried grafting on a D20-style skill system but that was really just tinkering at the edges.

And then a new game came out, Silver Age Sentinels. It was exactly what I was looking for: a sleek modern system with a silver age feel. And it was also about six months too late. I wanted to switch to SAS, but I didn't want to stop my existing campaign (which I was otherwise very happy with). What was I to do?

What I really wanted was to keep the campaign and change the rules, but this would be absurd. I've read descriptions of how people had switched their campaigns from AD&D 2nd edition to D&D 3rd edition, and I've never been able to understand how you could do this and keep plausibility? How would you explain that yesterday your thief had an x% chance of picking a lock, but today he's got a +10 chance? How would you explain that yesterday your wizard wasn't allowed to pick up a sword, but today he can, albeit badly?

The Solution

But then I read a post on RPG.net from someone describing how he was going to shift his superhero game from its existing system to SAS: he was going to have a storyline incorporating one of those 'Superman came out of the shower' epic cross-over story-arcs so beloved by DC (Crisis on Infinite Earths, Year Zero *(it was actually called Zero Hour – comic guy Editor)* and so on) in which they explain that every single comic you've bought over the last twenty years didn't actually happen, and that no, the Huntress isn't Batman's daughter, actually.

So that was my solution: an epic, cosmic story-line that would end with the very fabric of the universe being subtly altered in some way, with the 'rules-end' of those subtle alterations being created by using a different system. That still left the question of what the actual plot of this story-line would be, but with a little thought the answer was obvious: it would be the changing of reality itself.

How It Went
Shattered Realities Part I

Part I of my epic story-arc began with a short session in which an optical effect (like a crack in a prism, except that this was like a crack in the sky) appeared in the centre of Cornwall, stretching up into infinity, followed shortly after by a golden dome that covered the whole county, completely cutting it off from the outside world. (The dome was made of an impenetrable substance that extended right into the ground – it was actually a complete sphere – and which also cut off radio transmissions).

The PCs immediately flew to the point where the optical distortion had appeared (a road junction called Indian Queens) and found the police and bomb squad there. I'd spent a long time beforehand drawing up a very detailed squared-grid plan of the location on my battlemat, because although the players had created the new SAS versions of their characters, we were still – at this point – using the Golden Heroes system, whose combat is grid-based.

Of course, the disadvantage of having a marked up battlemat is that the players know there's going to be a combat, but a plan as detailed as the one I'd done can't be done in an instant. (It was a masterpiece, with entrance and exit ramps, a roundabout with overpass, the works).

NAH! IT'S SOME CLOWN IN A CAPE!

Anyhow, the PCs watched from behind a parked car as the bomb squad sent in the camera robot, which halted before the optical distortion, and then moved in to touch it…

…and that was the end of the session.

The next session started with the battle mat face down because, as I warned the players with a certain amount of nudge-nudge-wink-winking, I'd 'added a few things to it'. I then warned them that I really wanted to make this session move along at a quick-fire action pace, so I needed them to ignore, as much as was possible, anything they didn't quite understand and just go with the flow.

I then started the session with something along the lines of:

'Okay, we're going to start this session at exactly the point we finished the last one. Giles, you're out on your hover board off the beach at St Ives waiting for the surfing competition to start,

just gently humming over each wave as it comes in; Dylan and Jason, you're sitting in the beach-side cafe with one set of eyes on Giles, and the other set on Claire, the young woman you've been hired to find.'

As I did so, I handed a note to Bog Boy (whose character, Redemption, has powers to warp reality by altering probability). The note read something like: 'This is wrong. This is all wrong. You remember a complete lifetime lived in a world where the revolutions of 1968 led to world-wide peoples' governments. You remember setting up a detective agency with your childhood friends Giles and Dylan. But you remember another life, in which you were a hero called Redemption, where just moments ago you were on a road watching a robot approach a crack in the universe, and every fibre of your being tells you that that life was real, and this life is not.'

So while Mark and Bubba were both saying, 'Uh huh?' he was trying to figure out what the hell the note meant, but I didn't give him a chance and continued (in an 'have you all turned into amnesiac morons?' kind of voice):

'You're in a bar, watching the girl? Her father's some big shot in the local people's cooperative government, has been ever since the revolutions, and he hired your detective agency to find her remember? Because she ran away? And you guessed that since she was artistic she might come here to try and get some work painting designs on hoverboards? God, and you call me a session amnesiac!' … 'Yes, of course you can sodding well hoversurf – you wouldn't have entered a competition otherwise, would you?' … 'Have you not marked the skill on your character sheet? Oh, for pity's sake, hand it over.' … 'This is the wrong character sheet you moron!'

[Take Giles's Golden Heroes character sheet from Bubba, hand Silver Age Sentinels one back]

'Okay the klaxon sounds, there's a big wave coming in, roll!'

[Giles does a rather good ride that achieves a pretty respectable score]

'What optical distortion? Kordh Kernew? Cousin Jack? Look I don't know what you guys have been smoking but there's never never been anything or one by that name in this campaign. You're living in the Peoples' Region of Cornwall, you've known each other all your lives on account of growing up in the same cooperative and you recently formed a detective agency. Anyway... you've noticed that Claire seems quite nervous. She suddenly pushes her coffee away from her, gets up, and walks out.'

At which point, Jason (Bog Boy), who knows that this is false, and therefore doesn't particularly give a damn, follows after her and in front of a horrified Dylan (Mark has by now worked out what's going on, and is enthusiastically roleplaying accordingly), shouts: 'Claire!'

I continued:

'Okay, you've been travelling down the coast for some weeks now, just the three of you and your mule, Genghis. You're now walking down the old abandoned tracks of the what the Old People call a railway, when you hear screams from in front of you.'

As I was saying this I handed Bog Boy a note, which said something like: 'This is wrong. This is all wrong. You remember a complete lifetime lived in a world where the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 led to a devastating nuclear war. But you also remember another life, in which the revolutions of 1968 led to world-wide peoples' governments, and another life before that, in which you were a hero called Redemption, where just moments ago you were on a road watching a robot approach a crack in the universe, and every fibre of your being tells you that that life was real, and this life and the other are not.'

As he read that, I turned the battlemat back over to reveal not the road junction of the week before, but a marked up map of the ruins of this world's St Ives railway station.

Giles (Bubba) and Mark (Dylan), who were now really getting into things, dashed forward and found themselves in a fight with a post-

apocalyptic bunch called the Hades gang who were attempting to kidnap a local girl. Meanwhile, Jason (Bog Boy, who was now suffering from brain overload) attempted unsuccessfully to persuade an uncooperative Genghis into a second gear, arriving in the fight just in time for me to lay a second mat down over the top of the first and describe how the blinding rain was driving into their faces as they crept down the lane towards the SS headquarters when the dark night air was pieced by a shout of 'Halt!' coming from a patrol of six SS men jumping out in front of them – and then give a note to Bog Boy.

'This is wrong. This is all wrong. You remember a complete lifetime lived in a world where the Nazis won the Second World War and created an SS state called Wessex. But you remember other lives, in which the Cuban Missile-Crisis of 1962 led to a devastating nuclear war, and in which the revolutions of 1968 led to world-wide peoples' governments, and another life before that, in which you were a hero called Redemption, where just moments ago you were on a road watching a robot approach a crack in the universe, and every fibre of your being tells you that that last life was real, and this life and the others are not.'

The three PCs, wearing the high-tech black retractable uniforms supplied to them by their cell-leader, quickly made short work of the SS troopers, and by the time Bog Boy arrived back from a toilet break (he'd nipped up after making his attack) the other two had managed to finish them off. (We were just sitting around the battlemat, waiting for him).

Bog Boy: Is it me? [Meaning, 'Is it my turn?']

Me: Yeah. Claire says 'What?'

Bog Boy: What?

Me: Claire. She's heard you calling for her, she's turned round and said, 'What?' and now she's looking at you, hands on hips.

Bog Boy: [Shaking his head, realising what is going on, and figuring out that he doesn't care] Oh for God's sake Claire. Go home. Your father's worried about you. [To Dylan] Come on! We've got to go!

Dylan: What? Are you insane? We were supposed to find her and report back, not blab to her that her father's looking for her? Have you totally lost it?

Bog Boy: Look, none of this matters. We've got to go to Indian Queens.

Dylan: What?

And then I changed again. I spent the rest of the session cycling between 'Surfworld', in which Jason attempted to convince his angry colleagues that he hadn't flipped; 'Wasteworld', in which he amazed his travelling companions by first using telekinetic powers they hadn't known he possessed and then somehow knowing how to start the motor-cycle they'd captured from the raiders; and 'Reichworld', in which they made it back across the darkened moors to their safe house, where they awaited contact by their cell-leader.

But in all the worlds, the only thing Jason cared about was getting back to Indian Queens, and in Surfworld he managed to convince Giles and Dylan to take him there in a car they hired from a local cooperative. But he found no answers there, just an empty field where a modern bypass should have been in the world he knew was real.

The session ended with him on his knees, alone in the field with his arms stretched despairingly to the sky, as Giles and Dylan looked on from the car, muttering: 'He's really lost it.'

Even though I say so myself, it was a very good session – easily the best session I've ever managed to Games Master. By now, Bog Boy was shell-shocked, and Bubba and Mark were simply enjoying themselves. (After all, it wasn't their problem – Bog Boy was clearly the one who had to sort things out since his character was the only one who knew anything was wrong).

The first half of the scenario (I dubbed this 'Shattered Realities I') lasted five more sessions. In Surfworld, Jason went in search of drink and women, fracturing his relationship with that world's Giles and Jason to breaking point, while they, meanwhile, were investigating a case that was a close parallel of one they'd solved in the real world – something Jason could have told them if he hadn't been face down in a gutter at the time. In Wasteworld, they helped break up the motorcycle gang who'd been plaguing the local area. And in Reichworld, they sat in the safe house waiting for their cell leader to contact them.

Until Jason figured something out.

In the real world, a (Celtic? Sidhe?) girl called Alastrina, from an otherwhen she called Avalon, had recruited them on behalf of the Goddess, and given them magical costumes that could grow in an instant from a torc on their arm to entirely clad them, and then in an instant more shrink back again. These costumes had other properties: they could unlock the power of stone circles, turning them into teleportation devices. You could teleport from any stone circle to any other stone circle, provided you had a mental image of what the other stone circle looked like. (An ability they'd once used to teleport across the galaxy to a Dyson sphere).

In Reichworld they had the same costumes. They were of an identical black design, rather than individual 'superhero' designs, but they shrank back into the torc in exactly the same way. Realising this, Jason used every bit of influence he had with Giles and Dylan to persuade them to spend a day travelling through SS Wessex to a remote stone circle on Bodmin Moor, when he clasped hands with them, thought...

...and jumped to a stone circle just a mile away (which proved to the other two that he, Jason, knew some stuff that they didn't). They then clasped hands again, and Jason thought...

...and jumped to the stone circle on the Dyson sphere, where he found the remains of a motorcycle that the real-world Giles had been transporting there bit by bit.

Which meant that they were back in the real-world.

Meanwhile, Giles and Dylan (who were now their real-world selves) were on their knees as floods of memories from four different lives merged. (This was followed by tears and hugs all around as they apologised for how they'd been treating Jason in Surfworld).

They tried teleporting back to Stonehenge in Wiltshire, and found they were still in the real-world (amid some confused tourists). Finding an abandoned newspaper, they read an article that described how Cornwall was still trapped behind an impenetrable golden dome.

(To explain: Inside the dome was three different alternate realities, all using the SAS rules system. Outside the dome, it was still the original reality, with the Golden Heroes rules system.)

They travelled to London and talked to the security services, who were no help, and then visited Giles's mother, who besides being very relieved

to see him, was able to give him one vital piece of information: his gamekeeper (a retired superhero they'd rescued from the Dyson sphere) had called her the evening the event happened (when they checked the time, it was after the distortion appeared but before the dome came down) to pass on a message to Giles. The message was that Alastrina (or 'your funny blond friend who talks so strangely') had called to say she'd arrived in Cornwall (she used to teleport from Avalon, arriving at the Merry Maidens stone circle) and that he was on his way to pick her up.

Which meant that Alastrina had been in Cornwall when the event occurred – and might therefore be trapped in one or all of the three realities under the dome. (Presumably as unaware of what was going on as everyone else save Jason).

And then they figured out one more thing: someone had had to supply them with the costumes in Reichworld, someone who was helping them fight the Nazis, and that someone might well be Alastrina (or someone from her people).

So they now had a plan: go back into the dome, find Alastrina in Reichworld, get her to teleport them to Avalon, and then let her people tell them just what the hell they had to do to sort things out. (This was in fact exactly what they were supposed to do – getting to Avalon was the ending point of Shattered Realities I).

They teleported back, into the three-way madness that was life under the dome (Giles and Dylan had, of course, no memory of what had happened outside as soon as they arrived back – they just thought that the second teleportation attempt had merely jumped them forward in time) and continued as before, except that in Reichworld, Jason was now waiting for the cell-leader to arrive. The cell-leader, when he arrived, was reluctant to talk, but opened up when Jason made it clear how much he knew (such as describing what Alastrina looked like).

The cell-leader was able to confirm that yes, she was the contact who supplied the suits but he had some bad news. She'd arrived on an unscheduled supply run the night of the raid on the police station, but had been picked up by the SS and taken to their headquarters on St Michaels Mount. (An steep, isolated island, just off the coast near Penzance).

At this point Jason had a very bright idea (actually, Bubba had a very bright idea, but we decided that this was a fair way of simulating Jason's genius level intellect – and besides, I was feeling a bit sorry for him right

now, given what I'd been putting him through). The idea was that he could wait until things cycled through to Surfworld, and then just visit that world's peaceful St Michael's Mount as a tourist – thus scouting and mapping out the whole place.

Which he did.

To cut a long story short, their Reichworld selves infiltrated the SS headquarters, broke into the SS General's bedroom where an unhappy, ball-gown-clad Alastrina was being kept...

Jason: My name's Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you.

Dyan, Giles and Alastrina: What?

Jason: Never mind.

...took her to the Merry Maidens stone circle, and got her to teleport them back to Avalon.

At which point the memories returned for Dylan, Giles and Alastrina – who thanked them for rescuing her from a prison where she hadn't even known who she really was. (While under the Dome, she'd been an Alastrina from an alternate Avalon whose linked sister world, Earth, had been conquered by the Nazis).

Shattered Realities I was over, and I was exactly where I wanted to be. Having shattered reality into four different worlds, three of which were under the SAS rules system, all I needed to do now was figure out how the PCs could put reality back together again, in one, single SAS world that was almost like the world they'd started in – but different enough to account for the different rules.

There was just one slight problem: I didn't have a clue how to do that.

Next issue, I'll tell you what I came up with.

> [1]Don't ask. Seriously, don't ask. I've had many disturbing conversations with Demonic and this came out of the one that was probably the most disturbing of them all.

GAMING SYMPOSIUM

EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD

A LOOK INSIDE MAKING A MEMORABLE VILLAIN, PART I

Robert Griffin

Heroes… legends are written about them, songs are sung in their honour and they are the beloved fictional alter egos of the Players in most campaigns. They run the gamut from 'scoundrel with a heart of gold' to 'unassailable bastion of purity and goodness' but for the most they are the centre of every fantasy campaign. They are its crux, the hub around which the story revolves and one of the most crucial elements of the campaign. Without them the story would be nothing, in fact it could be argued that without the heroes the story could not even exist. They are the alpha and the omega of the story. Most Players know this and it brings them back again and again.

The idea that they are the bright shining sun around which the Games Master's painstakingly detailed fictional world revolves around is incredibly seductive. It appeals to their sense of vanity, their desire for escapism and brings them back for more week after week. Deep within the heart of all Games Masters, however, there lies a darker truth, a more sinister drive for the stories they tell. It is not about the heroes, it is all about the villain.
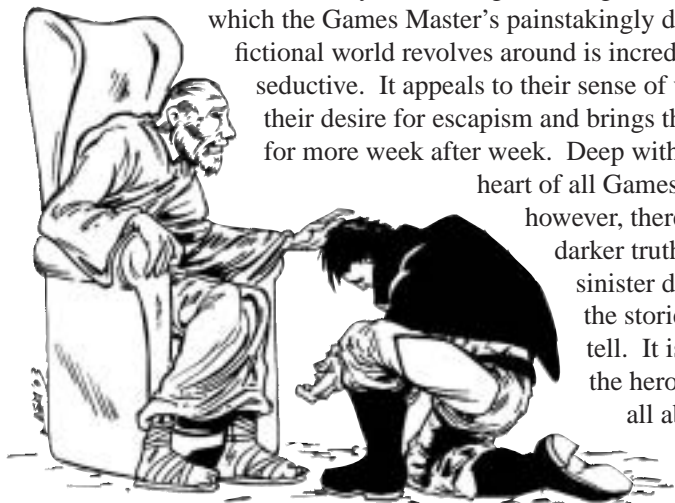
Oh, the heroes win. They get the glory, the gold and the girl but at the end of the campaign it was always the villain's story. Most Games Masters try not to let their Players discover the truth, but they know. It was the villain's tale all along. After all, the villains drive the story; they propel the plot and are the moral metre stick the heroes measure themselves against. Without their depredations the heroes would be out of work and would never make it out of the inn. They would sit content to gorge themselves on the local vintage and do nothing. It is the villain who gives them purpose and keeps them employed. Consider the fact that in most campaigns the Players rely on the plot hooks generated by their villains to motivate them, to steer them in the right direction and to serve as the source of evil for them to vanquish. Without a carefully crafted and detailed villain, replete with plots and plans for base villainy what would the average hero be? He would be just another commoner with a sword and a dream.

Creating the villain, his henchmen, allies and minions is the most integral aspect of campaign creation for the Games Master. The villain is the dark reflection of the hero. He is their antithesis. The most daunting and implacable enemy and he is what makes their deeds mean anything. Without a worthy villain the heroes cannot reach the true heights of heroism, without his darkness they cannot shine. It is for this reason that such careful planning must be given to the villain. Every Player is expecting the Games Master to make their character a hero. Without a truly satisfying villain to rail against the campaign can seem hollow, the threats shallow and the heroes little more then cardboard caricatures defeating straw men.

In crafting these key antagonists for the Players the Games Master has to establish four elements to create his villain: Goals, motivation, methods and personality. Once the Games Master has established these pieces virtually every other decision he needs to make for his budding villain practically decides itself. It is from these four elements every other aspect of the villain will flow. That is why these four elements require the most careful amount of attention. If the foundation of the villain is faulty he will not stand as a worthy counterpoint to the Players and instead becomes little more then another faceless Non-Player Character. One with a larger experience point reward at the end, but certainly not the memorable foe he deserves to be.

Goals: Who do you want to conquer today?

The first, and arguably most important, step in making a new villain is to determine what his goals are. This is going to help determine everything about him from this point forward. There are a few things the Games Master wants to decide as he determines the driving goals of his master villain: the power level of his goals and the type of goals he intends to pursue.

Power Level

The Party's level should help determine the scope of their villain. Sending the Player Characters against world conquering villains right out of the gate is a sure fire way to get them killed. In the beginning the characters should be dealing with low to mid-level villains, who are ideally henchmen for larger and more formidable villains. As such, their goals should be localised and small enough that the characters have a chance to interfere on a meaningful level. Ideally you want the characters to interact with a low level ladder of lesser villains who either work for or are being manipulated by your master villain.

Remember, at the party's lower levels the master villain should hardly even be aware of their existence. As they progress in level they will garner more and more of his attention as they foil more and more elements of his master plans. In that vein, remember at low levels the goals of the master villain that the characters actually encounter should be small; for example: The master villain needs a shipment to a far away kingdom hijacked and has hired raiders to take it out. He has begun stirring up trouble with local goblin hordes in an effort to distract the local militia or he has hired a rival group of adventurers to acquire an item that the Player Characters are looking for. These are all small items that a low level party can deal with and, at first, should have no apparent connection to any sort of overriding master plan. Over time, links between the low level goals, mid-level goals and high level goals of the master villain should become more apparent as they begin to create a picture of his true overriding goal.

This is not to say that the Games Master should simplify the master villain's goals overall, just tier them so as to create level appropriate challenges for the Player Characters. As the characters defeat more and more parts of his master plan, these smaller goals become the foundation for the larger and more integral parts of the master villain's schemes. This allows the characters to evolve from relative unknowns, to minor annoyances, to potential threats and ultimately culminating in their evaluation as legitimate enemies to the master villain. Additionally, by slowly revealing the master villain's plan through the use of tiered goals or stages, it allows the Players to begin feeling they are making a serious impact on the master villain.

Stage One: Resource gathering and manipulation

From 1st to 5th levels, the master villain should be focusing on the 'resource gathering' or 'situation manipulation' stage of the master plan. It is in this section of levels that the master villain has begun setting the stage for his ultimate goal by acquiring funds, putting minions in position, riling local monsters or begun sowing dissention amongst the local populace. All of these things should seem unimportant at the time but in retrospect they should stand out as the beginning symptoms of a larger problem. These little goals will give the Player Characters time to begin amassing the needed experience points that will help them make it through the mid level goals of the master villain. It is easy to intersperse other adventures not related to the master villain and this is recommend throughout the course of the campaign. Due to the mundane nature of this stage it is completely acceptable to throw in a few goals that are actually easy for the Player Characters in order to create the connections between events that will need to exist in the next stage. Remember this stage is nothing more then stage setting for the real meat of the master villain's goals in the next stage.

Stage Two: Solidification

From 6th to 12th level, the master villain begins the 'solidification' phase of his plans. It is here that he is looking to utilise the resources he has acquired in the first set of goals to begin ramping up to the next and potentially final stage of his master plan,
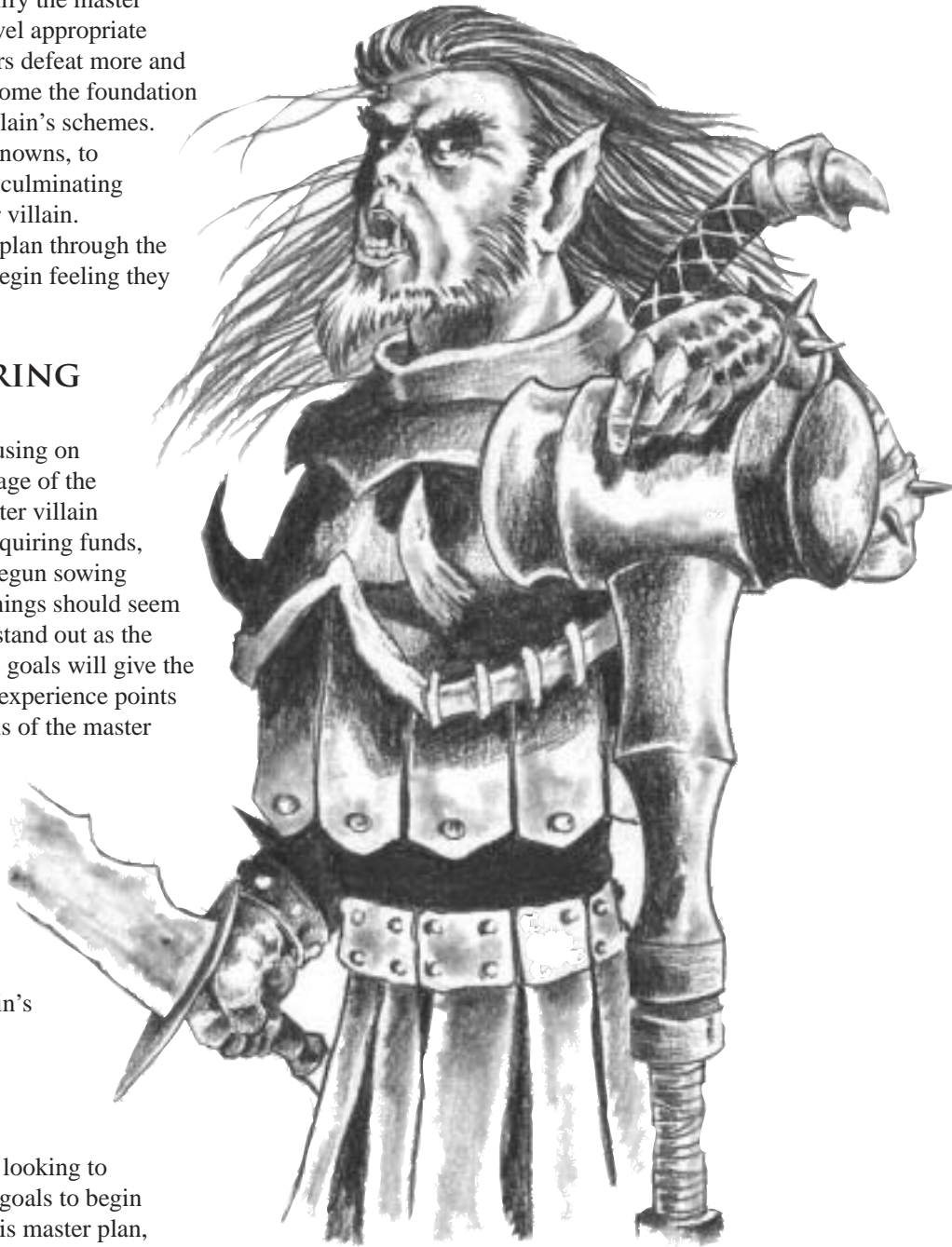
the 'implementation' stage. During the solidification stage, the master villain is most likely still acquiring resources and planting spies and minions in strategic locations though on a larger scale. If he was raiding weapons caravans to arm troops during the first phase of his plan, he should now begin planning attacks on larger targets such as armouries, alchemists for making Greek fire, dwarven mines for mithral ore and so on. He should also begin attempting more direct goals that are

instrumental to the success of his overall goal. Assassinations, border skirmishes and henchmen sent on quests for potent magical items are all appropriate for these levels. These mid-level goals should serve as more obvious links in a chain of nefarity that should now begin hinting at a larger plan and single intelligence behind things. It is at this stage that the Player Characters' actions should begin to get them noticed by the villain. Up until now they have thrown off the timetable a bit, required him to get materials and manpower from other locations or have exposed low level pawns who could be easily replaced. Now they have begun damaging the elements of his goals that are instrumental to the completion of his master plan. In all likelihood they have attracted enough attention to move on to a subset of the 'solidification' goals, 'obstacle removal'.

Stage 2.5: Obstacle removal

Obstacle removal should take up the 13th to 16th levels. It is during this time that the villain will begin sending his personal henchmen to begin dealing with people and places that are acting as a direct impediment to his plans. This is not to say that the Player Characters have not been having run-ins with his more powerful henchmen in the past. In all likelihood the party and his henchmen have tussled before. It is even more likely that the henchmen have warned the master villain that the Player Characters could be a problem in the future and have had their warnings left unheeded up until now. This is when all the anguish, annoyance and hatred these mid-level villains have built up toward the characters is brought to bear. This is the time that the villain lets slip the leash of his henchmen and they get to go after the characters directly.

By this point, the henchmen that work directly under the master villain have most likely had projects or missions they were directly responsible for go awry due to the interference of the Player Characters. They are chomping at the bit for some payback. At these levels, the Games Master should make it clear that there is a central figure at work, if the characters have not figured it out yet and that these low to mid level recurring villains work for him. These are the levels where the bad guys begin to get some back, as they begin seeking out the characters' contacts, allies, family and friends and threatening them, kidnapping them and generally making the Player Characters' lives miserable. They attempt to either incapacitate or eliminate the Player Characters before the all-important final stage of

'Implementation'. It is also during this stage that the villain will begin attempting to eliminate higher level Non-Player Characters who pose a threat to his plans as well, and their deaths can serve as a warning to the characters. The game has just stepped up a notch or two and the villain is through taking their interference with a smile.

After a few levels of attempts on their lives, damage to their reputation and what ever other wickedness the villain can dream up, the Player Characters will begin doing everything in their power to gather as much information on the villain, his men and his organisation at large. This is the stage in which true rivalry is born between the characters and the henchmen who should be more in line with the individual levels and abilities of the Player Characters themselves. All throughout this substage the elements from the solidification stage are going on as well and as the characters begin disrupting more and more of his plans, his attempts to remove them should increase as well right up until the penultimate stage, ' Final Implementation'.

Stage Three: Final Implementation

This is the holy grail of the master villain's goals. These are the final steps toward the utter realisation of all his wants and desires. It is these final goals that the villain will expend the most energy, resources and time enacting. If these goals fail, everything he has worked toward will come crashing down around him, typically violently. It is here that the villain will send his armies off to war, will unleash the great spell of much doom and destruction or will stride boldly into the heavens to challenge the gods themselves. Typically, all that stands between him and victory are the Player Characters. Generally the players have reached around 17th to 18th level so they are able to take a direct hand in combat the more active threats the master villain is now launching. There are fewer smaller goals within final implementation then in the previous stages but those that are there are vital to the final realisation of the master villain's endgame.

Now I typically do not recommend directly interfering with the free choice of the Players at anytime during the game - it hampers their enjoyment. It can make them feel as if they have no impact on their game and can result in the direct dissolution of the group, but however this part is important. If you have smaller goals before the last and final goal, the 'endgame', I do not recommend having more then one or two at the most and keep them fast paced. The Players should be

heading into the home stretch after all and finally when it comes to them defeating the final needed step before the endgame, make sure they blow it.

I am serious. If the Players have managed to make it this far and not so completely derailed the master villain's plans then they deserve a truly fitting climax. A battle to the death, mano a mano, with the master villain whose heels they have been dogging throughout the campaign and it should be an epic battle. More importantly, it should be satisfying and to have the Player Characters nip him in the bud right before the endgame is anticlimactic to say the least. This is his one last moment of triumph before his inevitable defeat. Let him have his egomaniacal speech, sit in his high backed leather chair, stroke his cat and with all his heart 'expect you to die, Mr Bond'. After all, he is about to loose in a big way, let him have his moment. Besides their defeat so near the end will only increase their desire to see him ended in a way befitting such a memorable villain. This stage should contain last minute preparations, withdrawal of key personnel from strategic locations, retreating to a volcano lair or whatever seems appropriate for your master villain to do at his moment of triumph. Finally, we come to the endgame.

Stage Four: Endgame

Here is where the Games Master sees if all that hard work has paid off, because this is the final showdown. Here the Player Characters should confront the master villain with a sense that it is them or him this time, no last minute escapes, no henchmen should come in and rescue him at the last minute. This is the end of everything. The whole campaign has been leading up to this moment. The villain stands on the threshold of utter victory. His armies march across the land. The giant magical gee-gaw of utter damnation has powered up and is preparing to burn the kingdom off the map. He can taste the victory and here his only goal is his overriding goal, the utter completion of his plan. This is the big goal, the one that has motivated every other goal up until this point in the campaign. If laid out, the players would see a connection from the very first parts of the campaign up until now and they know this is it. It is all or nothing and the payoff has to be worth the effort it took to get here.

The master villain's final endgame goal should reflect the campaign up until now and be built on the goals that came before it. If he was raiding for weapons in stage one, hiring mercenaries, training troops

and beginning border skirmishes in stage two, trying to kill the Player Characters and famous generals across the land in stage 2.5 and began his march toward the kingdom slaughtering all in the path of his mighty army in stage three, the endgame goal should be nothing less then utter conquest and subjugation of the known lands. A truly memorable master villain does not kill one person; he kills thousands. He does not conquer a city, he conquers the nation. He does not destroy a shrine to the gods, he destroys the gods themselves and the only thing in the known realms that will stop him is the Players gathered around the gaming table.

Now having looked at the power level of the master villain's goals a few words need to be said about what the goal itself is and, more importantly, what type of goal it is. There are many different options and each option helps to create a new and different villain from the last. By determining what type of goal the villain has, you help to determine both the method and motivation, as well as starting to answer a few questions about his personality.

Goal Types

Virtually all-master villains' goals fall into one of four categories: acquisition of power, acquisition of wealth, conquest and destruction. Each type has similarities and many of them overlap but in most instances one jumps to the forefront and forms the basis of the master villain's overriding goal. In order to truly get a handle on the master villain's motivations, methods and personality, his overriding goal has to be examined carefully as it exists in a symbiotic relationship with the elements the Games Master must determine later. By examining each one individually the Games Master can learn a great deal about his villain while also determining what tone the smaller tiered goals must possess in order to mesh with his endgame goal.

Acquisition of Power - The Power Monger

This master villain goal represents a lust for temporal power in some fashion, be it magical, physical or political. The archmage who desires to become the most potent source of arcane magic in the realms is a classic example of a villain with this goal. Keep in mind this goal differs from a goal of conquest by virtue of the fact that the villain

craves power as an end in and of itself not as a tool of conquest. He typically is not interested in using his power to rule or control. He desires nothing less then absolute mastery and power within a certain field. While it is possible for the villain to have conquest and destruction as secondary driving goals, his primary focus should always be on the accumulation of more and greater power. The acquisition of wealth goal can also overlap, typically as a means to an end in the master villain's on-going effort to secure larger and larger amounts of power.

The villain with an acquisition of power goal can run the gamut from moody lone wizard to charismatic fighter and both classes are drawn to this goal. Villainous sorcerers also tend to prefer this goal as it strongly favours their natural abilities. Rogues, bards and clerical villains are less commonly drawn to this goal as power for power's sake rarely appeals to these classes unless it falls in line with the cleric's religious dogma. Villainous monks also frequently find the absolute nature of pure power appealing in its lack of morality and the fact that the goal requires the master villain to do nothing with the power, simply amass it. In the end all that is really required on the part of the master villain is a desire for power. Virtually any class under the right circumstances can be tailored to fit this goal.

One of the most important aspects to remember about this goal is that it encompasses a wide range of concepts. Physical power is only the most obvious. Arcane power, divine power, political power and social power are all legitimate targets for the power monger.

Acquisition of Wealth - The Hoarder

This is the archetypal goal of the master thief. Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice is the hallmark of this goal. Gold, jewels, magical items or land makes no difference if it raises the master villain's bottom line. In many ways the master villain with the acquisition of wealth goal shares traits in common with the power monger. He rarely wants wealth to actually do anything with it. He covets and what he covets he tries to acquire for no other reason then to say he has it. He rarely has an interest in conquest, aside from the material gains he receives and destruction is frequently a goal completely contrary to the hoarder's mentality. This master villain is an acquisition expert. He has set his sights on being the wealthiest in the land and will utilise whatever resources he possesses to generate more wealth. The master of the thieves' guild with a massive network of extortionists, blackmailers, pickpockets and burglars whose is driven by his greed is a prime example of a master villain with this goal.

The acquisition of wealth goal is a natural for rogues. Evil fighters sacking and looting villages only to move on to the next town the next night, evil clerics bilking their congregation for tithes and mad wizards who hold the countryside in terror in order to extort monthly tribute from their leaders are all fine examples of villains with the acquisition of wealth goal. Greed is a common enough element to any master villain. To a hoarder it is his highest and most noble trait and any means can be justified if it turns a profit.

Physical wealth is the most common outlet for the hoarder, but within his desire to acquire lies a range of possibilities. The key element is that the villain covets something and seeks to be the soul possessor of it. It can be anything from knowledge, people or specific items as well as actual monies, jewels and treasure. Anything can be tailored to fit the goal of the hoarder.

Conquest - The Conqueror

The goal of conquest is the most common fantasy master villain goal. Over and above wealth or power, most fantasy master villains want to conquer the lands. It is a goal as old as the genre and it is the one the Players are most familiar with. The conqueror is the most likely to have elements of all the other goals beneath his overall goal of conquest. He also has the potential to pose the greatest threat to the largest number of people, second only to the destroyer. All the conqueror truly desires is to see the land's ruler and nations kneel before his throne, it is the pinnacle of his goal. His motivations for conquest are what will set one conqueror apart from another and will be covered in greater detail later. For now the Games Master has to determine the scope of his master villain's conquest and begin planning accordingly. A master villain with a desire to conquer a region needs to be considerably less prepared then a master villain with his sights set on conquering the planet, the planes or the multiverse!

Virtually any class can be found amongst the ranks of the conquerors, but fighters are the most common. Wizards, with a strong network of physical support and an army at their disposal are also commonly found. Even the classes who would seem unfit for the life of a conqueror can be easily slid into this mould. A bard who seeks to undermine the king through manipulation and political infighting in order to insight a coup and place himself upon the throne is a perfect example of a conqueror who chooses to use guile to conquer versus sheer force of arms.

Like the power monger and the hoarder, the conqueror has room in his goal for many different varieties of his chosen goal. A master villain may be looking for a physical, spiritual, political or ideological conquest and while warlords at the vanguard of massive armies are the most common variety of master villains with this goal they are not the only one.

Destruction - The Devastator

Few villains are more fearsome then the devastator. He cuts a scorched swath through the campaign wherever he goes. He seeks nothing more then the absolute annihilation of everything and everyone around him. Like the conqueror, the devastator tends to move with large armies unless he possesses the personal power to create the level of destruction he seeks. He also tends to have the least varied types of lesser goals then the others. He does not seek material gain and has no interest in conquest. He seeks nothing less then the utter destruction of everything he sees. The acquisition of power is simply another tool for the devastator to wreak havoc on his environment and as such it is the only other goal that tends to intermingle with his appetite for destruction. This is not to say that the devastator is always an unsubtle mindless killing machine. Both a bloodthirsty barbarian war leader seeking to purge the lands and a scheming and intelligent wizard who seeks the to destroy the royal family line are both examples of devastators. The most important element of the devastator is his desire for the annihilation of target. It can be as focused or as broad as the Games Master determines is appropriate for his campaign.

In the case of the nihilistic devastator the martial classes are the most obvious examples. Fighters and barbarian master villains often gravitate to the goal of the devastator as their natural destructive capabilities

are at their best in pursuit of these goals. Sorcerers and wizards also make excellent devastators with their ability to summon up massive and devastating arcane power. Evil rangers and clerics make excellent focused devastators. With their ability to track and hunt their prey an evil ranger is ideal for a master villain who is intent on the destruction of a race or organisation. An evil cleric whose dogma dictates the annihilation of another church also makes a formidable threat.

Like the other goals presented, the goal of destruction is easily modified to fit the tone of the master villain the Games Master seeks to make. The end result is the complete devastation of a race, ideology, organisation or even something as focused as the destruction of a specific class of adventurers all fit within the paradigm of the devastator.

More villiany - next month!

5 BABYLON

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Between Hammer and Anvil

A Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game adventure for Ranger characters of 1ˢᵗ to 2ⁿᵈ level

Bill Bodden

Note: A Non-Player Character Pak'Ma'Ra character is included at the end of this adventure. This creature will be added to the Player Character's squadron by the captain and Anla'shok drillmaster, a Minbari named Turlann, at the last minute, no doubt causing some grumbling among a group that has lived and trained together for some time. Pak'ma'ra are not highly regarded beings in the galaxy, but as with all things they have their value.

Plot Synopsis

The Player Character's are Rangers in training, and are nearly finished with a routine fighter pilot training program in an asteroid field when they begin receiving a distress signal from a damaged ship. If aid is not quickly delivered, the ship's crew may die.

Games Master's information

White Star 19, the ship that currently serves as the mobile training base for the Player Characters, has been unexpectedly called away to a nearby sector to receive intelligence too sensitive to be beamed; the Ranger Player Characters are on their own for a few hours. Their training mission is basically flight/target practice in a nearby asteroid field, and the Player Characters should just be finishing up their mission when the faint signal is picked up. Little do they realise that the signal was a decoy sent by a Drazi ambush to lure unsuspecting Brakiri ships to their doom.

This adventure can be played before or after the events of the Shadow War; the Drazi and Brakiri have been hostile to each other for decades, and a simple thing like both races being members of the League or the Alliance would not stop either from taking advantage of the other.

Background

There is little love lost between the Brakiri and the Drazi. As the Brakiri are often trade rivals of the Drazi, and occasionally make armed forays into Drazi space, so the Drazi respond in kind. No one knows who started it, but the Drazi are determined to finish it. They do not see minor

border skirmishes as true threats to the Freehold, but they do exact vengeance on the Brakiri from time to time, leading of course to more incursions by the Brakiri to recoup their losses. And so it goes…

Games Master's Background

In fact there *is* a Brakiri freighter, the *Ashtokir*, in the area of the ambush, and it is indeed crippled, with life support failing fast. A detachment of Drazi soldiers with self-contained life support packs are on board, ready to board and capture any Brakiri ship attempting to dock and search for survivors. The sensors in the Niall fighters the Player Characters will be piloting are not sensitive enough to differentiate similar life forms; they will confirm that life forms are present, and possibly distinguish between simple (Invertebrates, single-celled organisms, and so on) and complex forms. It is impossible to tell whether the life forms are Brakiri or not, though it is possible to discern, with a check of the onboard computer in any given fighter, that there are more life forms on the *Ashtokir* than is usual for such a ship. The freighter is the first thing any rescuers will see when arriving on the scene. If they are incautious, it may be the last…

The Drazi had not counted on anything but a Brakiri ship coming to the aid of the *Ashtokir*. The site of this ambush was carefully chosen for its remoteness and neutrality, and it took months before a Brakiri ship of any kind wandered close enough to the edge of this asteroid field to be ensnared. There are two Drazi Sunhawk

war cruisers standing by, the *Sholanth* and the *Kashok*, each maintaining position behind large asteroids that keep them out of view of both the distressed ship and the nearest jump gate. The idea is to capture Brakiri ships, not destroy them. The Drazi plan on creating a phantom Brakiri 'fleet' from the ships they capture in order to launch a surprise assault on several Brakiri colonies on the contested border with Drazi Space, reclaiming territory for the Freehold.

The information needed to further plan the assaults will be gleaned from prisoners taken in these ambushes. Not far away is a lightly crewed Drazi support vessel, the *Shodara*, used mainly for ferrying supplies and excess prisoners to and from the nearest Drazi Colony world. It is not particularly combat-worthy, though it can hold its own in a fight. Except for the two pilots being interrogated in the brig of the *Sholanth*, the rest of the Brakiri crew are on board the freighter *Shodara*.

The Training Mission

The Player Characters are assigned a straightforward mission: shoot all the beacons. The beacons have been seeded on asteroids in a relatively stable field. The danger of collision is low; these asteroids are sitting still for the most part, far enough away from major gravitational fields that the force exerted on them by outside influences is minimal. As long as the Player Characters are not too reckless in their piloting, they should be fine. However, even training can be dangerous in a military organisation, especially in a situation where walking away from a crash is not possible. The tricky part is that not all of the beacons face the same direction, so some mid-air acrobatics will be required to target those facing away from the entry point.

Have the players roll 12 Average and three Tough DC checks against their piloting skill. They need to make nine out of the 12 Average rolls to score the 100 points experience award at the end of the scenario. For each of the Tough rolls they make, they should be awarded 25 bonus experience points. Success means one step closer to graduation from Ranger training; failure means another run at the target range is in the trainee's future.

As the last Player Character is finishing up the targeting run, the first to complete the course begins picking up a distress signal. The signal is strong but badly muffled by static – asteroids often contain significant iron deposits in quantities sufficient to interfere with transmissions of this type, and the Player Characters are surrounded by asteroids. Have the Player Characters make a Tough Computer Use or Technical skill check to capture enough of the message for the onboard computer to

translate, or if the character happens to speak Brakiri, Tough Language (Brakiri) and Tough Listen checks. Failure means all that can be determined is that the distress call is in Brakiri. Multiple attempts can easily be made, as the message is being broadcast on a continual loop. With a successful medium-difficulty piloting check, changing position within the asteroid field will help find a clear patch for the message to be heard. The message claims to be from a Brakiri freighter with damaged engines, dead in the water and with life support systems failing. After the onboard translator program renders the message into Minbari, the rangers should quickly conclude that they have little time to spare, and rush to the aid of the *Ashtokir*.

As the Player Characters approach the co-ordinates, they can clearly see the ship; it appears to have suffered moderate damage from fairly serious ordnance; one of the jump engines has been blown clean off, and the adjacent sections of the ship are open to space. At this point, Ruhn/Synf will relay his information (See below) to the rest of the party. By now, the Player Characters should suspect a trap. Not only are life forms present, but it's clear that the communications system is functional, as with an easy computer use check, the Player Characters' sensors will detect a narrow-beam transmission from the *Ashtokir* a nearby asteroid (the hiding place of the *Sholanth*) on their approach.

As soon as the Player Characters' ships are within firing range of the *Ashtokir*, the Sunhawks will pop out from behind the asteroids and hail them. TheDrazi will insist that they were responding to the same distress call and will render any aid needed. The Rangers need not trouble themselves with this trivial matter. The coincidence is too strong to ignore. A quick scan of the Drazi ships will indicate that their weapons and fighters are powering

down; it should give the Player Characters a moment's pause when they realise that the Sunhawks are standing down from battle stations when the Brakiri ship was clearly attacked and no obvious attackers are in sight.

If the players stick to their guns and insist on helping with the rescue, Or'fa (Captain) Dramar of the Drazi will give permission for them to dock on the *Sholanth*, then to be ferried over to the *Ashtokir* by shuttle.

As soon as they disembark from their fighters, they will be disarmed, taken into custody and held in the brig of the *Sholanth,* along with two Brakiri pilots who have clearly been beaten in the last couple of hours. Ruhn/Synf will insist on remaining outside under any circumstances for that matter, all the while allowing his ship to slowly drift out of firing range, looking as if he was not really paying attention. In fact, Ruhn Synf is also trying to slip out of jamming range so he can send an emergency signal if things go badly. He respects the Drazi's ability to create more food for his people, but he is not looking forward to some of those meals potentially being his fellow Anla'shok. Pak'ma'ra are often mysterious and difficult to fathom, but they will not abandon those they consider to be their own. Within just a few minutes of sending his signal, Ruhn/Synf will report that a jump point is opening behind the Drazi vessels; White Star 19 has arrived.

The Drazi are belligerent, but not stupid. They know that where there is more than one Ranger, there is likely to be a White Star, particularly since the Player Characters are only equipped with short-range flyers. Under no circumstances should the Games Master allow this situation to devolve into a firefight; even if the Rangers ultimately win, as the first on the scene and the most likely to know what's really going on, the Player Characters themselves will likely be killed if heavy ordnance starts flying. The Drazi were trying to hatch a plot to weaken the Brakiri while minimising their own losses, not take on the entire ISA and the White Star Fleet.

While deliberations are ongoing, a jump point opens in space not far from the *Ashtokir*. Out of the gate comes the *Urala*, a Haltona-class Brakiri Frigate. Things just got worse.

The captain of the *Urala* is understandably uneasy to see two Drazi vessels so close to a Brakiri ship, but he also sees White Star 19, and is willing to hear things out before blowing the Drazi ships from the sky. His is a skillful bluff, however, and the Player Characters should be required to make Average Diplomacy checks to see any significant signs that he is willing to hold fire. At this point, the Drazi will be ready to negotiate a peaceful settlement, and will prove very eager to assist the crippled ship on its way to a safe port. The Brakiri, like their 'allies' the Drazi, are reluctant to pick on a couple of Rangers knowing full well the kind of trouble they would be buying for themselves. If the Rangers line their fighters up between the Urala and the Drazi Sunhawks, the both sides will have no choice but to hold fire. The Drazi will be trigger-happy at this point, assuming they have nothing to lose. Two Tough Diplomacy checks will be required to (1) calm them down and (2) make them understand that their situation is not longer tenable.

Devious Games Masters might have White Star 19 arrive well AFTER the *Urala* jumps in, but the situation should be monitored closely; if the Player Characters seem able to handle things without high-level help, it would certainly be a major coup for them, and would advance their standing as Rangers significantly. The arrival of White Star 19 will increase Player Character's Diplomacy scores by +6. Captain Turlann is willing to allow the Player Characters to handle things as a further test of their abilities, and will not intervene unless compelled to do so by complete failure on their part.

If things get completely out of hand before White Star 19 arrives, and the *Ashtokir* is destroyed and/or the crew lost, the Rangers can comfort themselves with the knowledge that the overall plot was foiled, saving perhaps thousands of lives in exchange for a few dozen. They should still get the experience award for foiling the plot. Cold comfort. The *Urala* will not bother to hold fire under those circumstances, and will do their best to obliterate all traces of Drazi from this particular section of space. The Drazi will, of course, object to such treatment, and will respond in kind. Under such circumstances the Player Characters would do well to get out of the way.

Outcome

The Drazi are a stubborn people, and are unlikely to give up their prisoners and their prize – the *Ashtokir* – willingly. The Player Characters could easily be in hot water very quickly indeed. However, even if all goes badly, White Star 19's arrival will help calm everyone down. The Anla'shok are well known as a force to be reckoned with, and the Drazi are unlikely to shoot down any of the Rangers outright, as long as the Rangers did not fire first. If the Drazi do end up capturing the Player Characters, they would be prevented from doing anything harsh by the arrival of the Brakiri Frigate or the White Star. If the Drazi's activities are made public knowledge and they are not allowed time to hide the evidence (destroy the ship and hide or kill the prisoners, for example) they will abandon their plan of gathering a Brakiri phantom fleet altogether – for now.

The most likely solution would be for the Drazi to surrender the vessel to the Rangers outright, who then tow it, along with its crew, to a port of safety, escorted by the *Urala*. The Drazi might also be embarrassed enough with the discovery of their plot to attack another League member that they would consider allowing the crew and the ship to leave unharmed. None of the Brakiri truly know what the Drazi were up to, though when told of what happened after their capture, they can probably figure it out pretty quickly.

Notes on Pak'ma'ra

The Pak'ma'ra are pariahs of the galaxy; their hygiene is poor, they smell bad, and they eat raw carrion. What is to like?

The Pak'ma'ra also make excellent intelligence gatherers, since they live on nearly every habitable planet in the galaxy, and travel freely and unimpeded between sectors in small family-based groups. They are avoided by all other beings because of their habits, to the point of being ignored even when in relatively close proximity. Because of this they make excellent spies.

Pak'ma'ra are an extremely goal-oriented race. Once given a mission by someone it considers to be in a position of authority (almost exclusively other Pak'ma'ra, though there are exceptions), a Pak'ma'ra will pursue that task to its completion and beyond – no one accuses Pak'ma'ra of not being thorough. As an example, if a Pak'Ma'ra pilot is ordered to ferry refugees from one planet

Feats: Shields of Silver, Vehicle Dodge, Dogfighter, Improved Initiative, Data Access, Spacecraft Proficiency, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (Denn'bok), Weapon Focus (Denn'bok)
Equipment: Denn'bok

Captain Turlann is a classic Anla'shok Officer; he lives for the One, he dies for the One. He is currently struggling mightily with his racial aversion to Pak'ma'ra, but should things resolve satisfactorily in this adventure, he is likely to take a positive personal interest in the career of Lunf/Synf.

Turlann trains to become a Denn'bok Master, and is close to achieving this goal.

Had Turlann been born to the Worker Caste instead of the Warrior Caste, he might well have become an engineer, and an excellent one at that. As things stand, he is still one of the most knowledgeable Rangers on White Star 19 in regard to ships systems, and if the need arises and his attention is not required elsewhere, he will readily dig in to help with any necessary repairs. He is curious about all things mechanical, and loves nothing more than taking things apart and putting them back together in his spare time.

Dramar, Or'fa of the Drazi vessel Sholanth

Mission Commander
4th level Drazi Soldier
Hit points: 34
Initiative: +5
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14
Attack: +7 melee or +7 ranged

Special Qualities: Drazi Racial Traits, Weapons Training (sidearms), Covering Fire
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +4, Will +2
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 16, Con 16, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 12
Skills: Climb +5, Concentration +4, Drive +5, Hide +4, Intimidate +3, Jump +5, Listen +2, Medical +3, Move Silently +4, Spot +3, Survival +3, Swim +5, Technical (electronics: communications systems) +4
Feats: Improved Unarmed Strike, Blind Fight

Dramar is a combat machine, and though still youthful has seen years of service as a fleet officer, as no other Drazi has been able to defeat him, and thus replace him, yet. Quite intelligent by any standard, Dramar is no fool, though he is prone to the same aggressive tendencies as his brethren. Dramar has seen Rangers in action once before, and has been impressed with their combat skills and their ability to intimidate. Regardless of the outcome of this encounter, he will bear no ill will towards the Player Character, and will likely try to sponsor Drazi initiates for acceptance in the Anla'shok

Dramar is in overall command of this mission, and his failure will be noted, though not likely to be costly to his career. Success on the other hand will mean a significant blow to the Brakiri, which is likely to get Dramar noticed at the highest levels of the Shadak.

Captain Kirani, Brakiri Officer

(Pri-Wakat Clan)
6th Level Officer (pilot)
Hit points: 20
Initiative: +5
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13

Attack: +7/+2 melee or +8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Brakiri Racial Traits, Executive Privilege
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +3, Will +5
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 15, Cha 11
Skills: Appraise +13, Bluff +10, Computer Use +6, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +9, Pilot +5, Sense Motive +12, Spot +10, Survival +8
Feats: Dogfighter, Improved Initiative, Point Blank Shot

Capatin Kirani is remarkably thoughtful for one in his position, and though he is outraged at the treatment of his people, he is far more interested in the intelligence they may have gleaned from their Drazi captors. The idea for a phantom fleet is a good one; he will suggest it to his superiors as soon as he makes his report…

He is also grateful to the Rangers for intervening to save his fellow Brakiri and their ship. He may be a useful contact in the future. Likewise he will foster this connection to the Ranger Player Characters for what benefit he may glean from it.

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