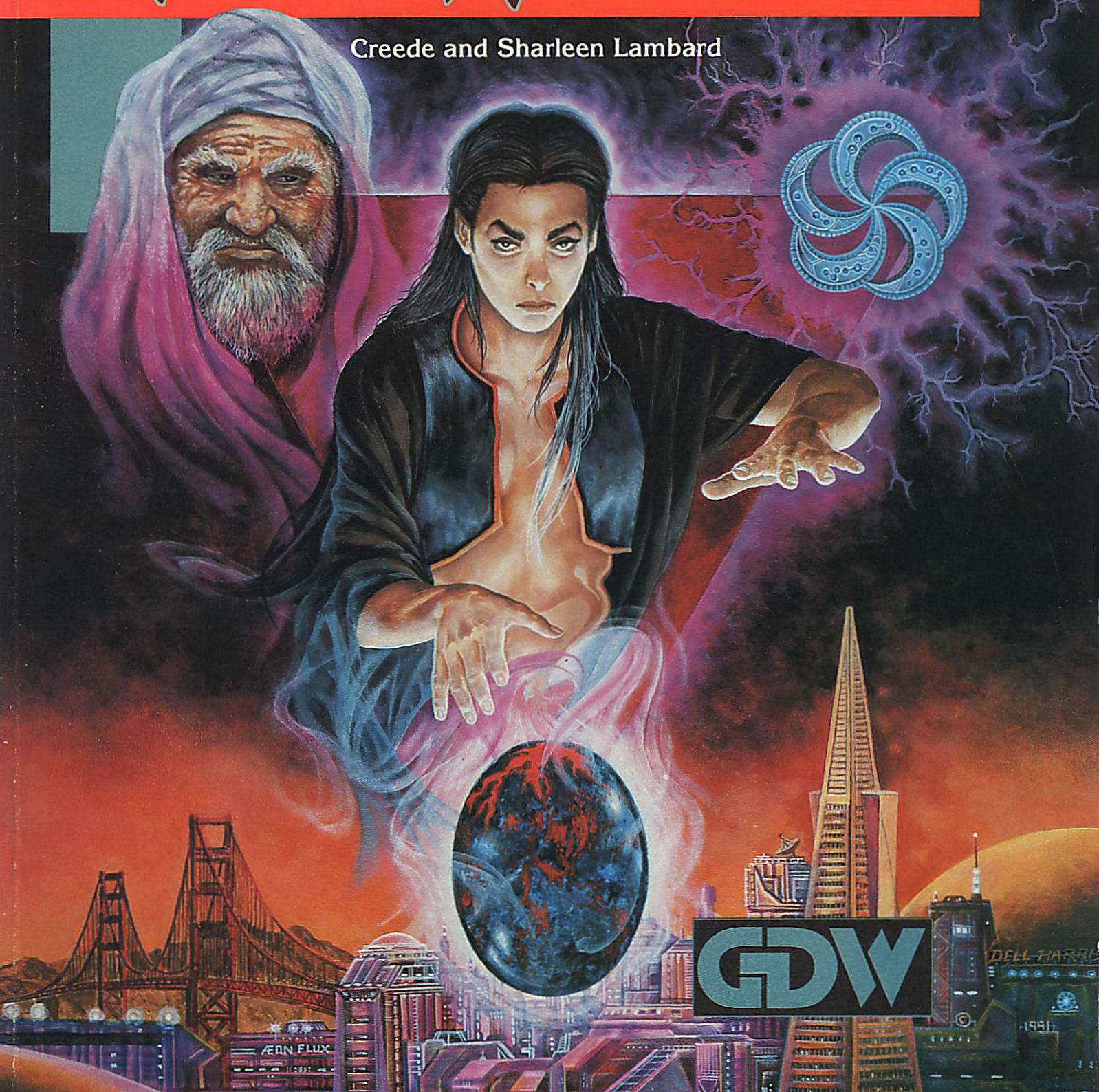


DARK CONSPIRACY™

HEART OF

DARKNESS™

Creede and Sharleen Lambard



HEART OF DARKNESS



For a thousand years, the Dark Lady, a sorceress of ancient Baghdad, has lain in mystic stasis, her mind imprisoned through the power of a legendary gem.

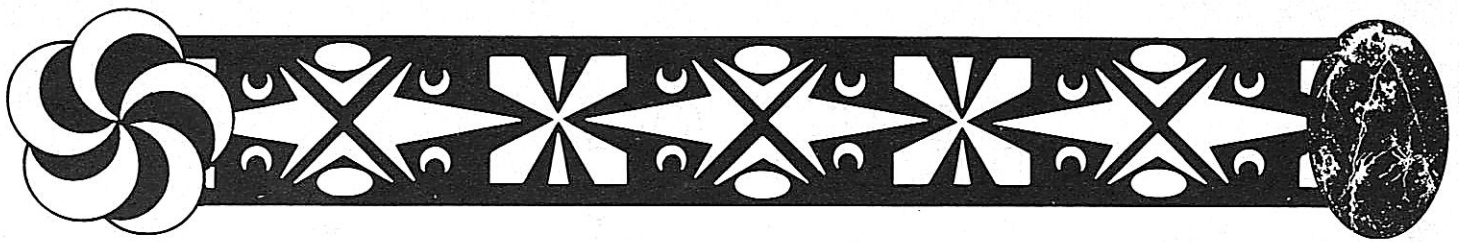
For a thousand years, a hideous race of parasites has chafed at the wards barring them from Earth, and has labored to aid the Dark Lady who could free them.

For a thousand years, the Servants of the Dark Lady have sought to destroy the mystic opal called "Heart of Darkness," to release their evil mistress into the world once again.

For a thousand years, the Brothers of Ahmed have dogged the heels of the Servants, seeking the knowledge to destroy the Dark Lady once and for all time.

Yesterday, your characters found a clue leading to the Heart of Darkness. Can they tread the tangled path to the Dark Lady's destruction without falling prey to the many dangers along the way?

Creede and Sharleen Lambard



To Anne Bennett, with thanks.

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Heart of Darkness

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FIST-SIZED GEM STOLEN FROM AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM—BY GHOSTS!



Barely one week ago, an immense black opal went on display at the Museum of Natural History in Sydney, Australia, and it was stolen the very next night, but apparently not by human thieves. To all indications, the gem was stolen by ghosts! According to John Bellingham, the museum's director, there was no way that a human could have perpetrated the theft. "The museum is locked securely every night," Bellingham told our reporter, "and we have a staff of very professional security guards to ensure that all of our exhibits remain safe. Despite this, the opal has turned up missing, but there is no evidence of a break-in." Bellingham went on to say that this is the first time an exhibit has ever gone missing from the museum. "Our night watchmen all volunteered immediately for lie detector tests," the curator said, "and they all passed with flying colors."

This paper has discovered, however, that the gem has a long history of such mysterious disappearances. The opal, popularly known as the Heart of Darkness due to the fact that it is a deep black in color but with deep red veinings, has been tied to scores of deaths over the past 10 centuries.

Now it seems to have added another

victim to its list. According to our sources, one of the night watchmen at the Museum of Natural History has recently died under very mysterious circumstances. Arthur Willoughby, who had worked for the museum for over 18 years, was found dead in his apartment two days after the opal turned up missing. According to police reports, he hung himself upside down from his shower, then slit his own throat with a pair of cuticle scissors. When questioned about the death, curator Bellingham had this to say: "I was shocked and deeply distressed to hear the news about Arthur. He'd been with us for a long time, and he always had a kind word for everyone. He can't have believed that we suspected him of the theft, especially after he passed the lie detector tests, but I can't imagine why else he would have taken his own life. I guess it just goes to show that severe depression can strike any one of us."

When asked what the museum plans to do about the Heart's theft, Bellingham responded, "We'll just have to let the police do their job, and wait for the thing to turn up again."

The Heart's actual owner, a Sydney gem dealer by the name of Joseph Miller, could not be reached for comment.

BOBBY DARIN SINGS TO ME THROUGH MY JEWELRY!

Edna Raffenberg of St. Louis claims that Bobby Darin is singing to her through a pendant given to her by her husband on their 30th wedding anniversary.

"I don't know why me or why Bobby Darin," Raffenberg says. "I was never a big Bobby Darin fan. When I was a kid, I used to listen to Patsy Cline and Connie Stevens a lot, and I thought Frankie Avalon was cute, but Bobby Darin? No, I didn't care much for him."

Yet days after her husband gave her the pendant, she started hearing *Mack the Knife* every so often.

"At first I thought it was the radio," she says, "but then one day I got up to turn the radio off, and it was already off!"

Raffenberg started putting two and two together when she left the necklace home one night and the music stopped. "I sort of figured it out by process of elimination."

Even though she can hear *Splish Splash* coming through loud and clear, no one else seems to be able to. "It's really weird," the Raffenbergs' 28-year-old daughter Julia says. "Mom goes around humming these stupid songs all day. I think she needs help."

Mr. Raffenberg agrees. "She keeps insisting that she hears Bobby Darin singing to her. I don't know how much longer I can take it. I love her and all, but it's starting to get to me, if you know what I mean."

Apparently Darin's repertoire has expanded in the decades since he died. "He does all kinds of late 20th-century songs," Mrs. Raffenberg says, "but no rap. I get the feeling he doesn't think too much of rap. He does a real mean version of *Memories and Love Will Keep Us Together*, though."

Simon Murcheson, of the American Institute for Skeptical Thought, dismisses the phenomenon as a manifestation of mental illness. "Apparently, Mrs. Raffenberg is suffering from some kind of hallucination," he says, "similar to, oh, sightings of Elvis."

But Edna Raffenberg disagrees. "Elvis is everywhere," she says. "I seem to be the only one who has Bobby Darin."

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THE HEART OF DARKNESS

For nearly 1000 years, there have been dark legends circulating the Eastern world of an opal called the Heart of Darkness. Although relatively few people in the West have ever heard of the gem, Oriental legends say that the opal is of unsurpassed beauty, and many claim that it has mystical powers but that its possession inevitably leads to harm. No one is certain of the gem's origins, but early legends first place it at the court of a minor caliph of Baghdad during the 10th century AD, where it is purported to have driven a court vizier mad and to have killed his only son before mysteriously disappearing from the caliphate.

Nine hundred years passed with only the vaguest rumors of the Heart's whereabouts, but what rumors surfaced were always linked with stories of death and destruction. Then, in 1828, a stone matching the Heart's description was listed in the inventory of the House of Kwan, one of the largest gem merchants in Hong Kong. According to those records, the house patriarch developed a loathing for the stone, claiming it was consuming his soul, and sent it to a gem dealer in England. But while en route, the ship upon which it was carried was attacked by pirates who slaughtered the crew and passengers, and the stone disappeared.

Next, in 1833, a similar stone was reported to be briefly in the possession of a slave smuggler who operated out of west Africa. He claimed that the opal was worn by a tribal queen he captured near what is now Isha, Nigeria, and whom he sold to a plantation owner in the southern US. Nothing is known of the woman after that sale, but the slave ship was wrecked shortly thereafter in a storm off the African coast, drowning the captain and his entire crew.

Just before the onset of World War I, another gem matching the Heart's description was known to

have been in the possession of a man named Nassir ben Yusuf, the leader of a small group of religious fanatics in the region of Baghdad. Just before the British occupation of Mesopotamia during World War I, Yusuf was rumored to have been killed by German agents, and the stone disappeared once again. Leaderless, Yusuf's following fell prey to inertia and dispersed over the course of next several years.

Rumor then places the stone near Rio de Janeiro. In 1952, an investigation into the brutal slaying of a police officer revealed that the officer had purportedly been looking for a buyer for a gem matching the Heart of Darkness' description, but no gem was discovered among his possessions.

Now the stone, or one very much like it, has surfaced in Sydney, Australia. It went on display one week ago as part of a gemological exhibit at the city's Museum of Natural History. But a mere day after the exhibit opened, the gem disappeared during the night. Interestingly, there was no evidence of a break-in and nothing else was missing, leading many to suspect it was an "inside job." Attention focused primarily on the museum's complement of night watchmen. Although all submitted to lie detector tests—and passed—suspicion remained high, and in a tragic development, one of the watchmen fell prey to a severe depression and took his own life, furthering legends of the gem's cursed power.

Now rumors circulate the empathic underground that the stone is central to a particularly hideous Dark Minion plot. Someone has to find the stone and neutralize it before it is too late.

Heart of Darkness will take you around the world on an investigation of global proportions. Are you up to the challenge?

REFEREE'S INTRODUCTION

Many roleplaying adventures are linear designs. The party goes from one encounter to the next in a preplanned fashion. **Heart of Darkness** is somewhat different—most of its settings are nonlinear. There are five cities where important clues can be found, but the characters can visit those cities in any order they choose. At some point along the way, they will be contacted by the Brothers of Ahmed—likely in its guise as the Oyama Corporation—but exactly how and exactly when will depend upon the exact actions of the PCs. As they proceed through the adventure, the PCs will be collecting pieces of an item of power known as Ahmed's Amulet, and once the complete amulet has been assembled, they will be drawn to the location for the final battle for the Heart of Darkness. From that point on, the adventure then proceeds in a more linear fashion.

This book is divided into three sections. The first contains the adventure, including a chapter concerning the PCs' eventual contact with the Brothers of Ahmed/Oyama Corporation, a separate chapter for each city the PCs will visit, a chapter detailing the climactic battle with the Cult of Fatima, and a chapter of denouement. The second section, "Research Results," includes research information which will become available to the characters as they investigate. Much of this chapter can be photocopied and handed to the players when appropriate. The third section, "Referee Resources," contains additional background material for referees, things which will prepare them to extrapolate from the basic plot of the adventure, allowing the adventure itself to be as wide-ranging as possible and providing material for repercussions in future adventures. Here you will also find ideas for adjusting the adventure's difficulty for your own group.

HISTORICAL SYNOPSIS

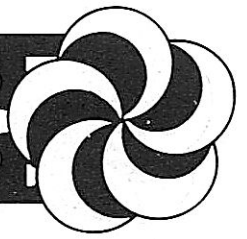
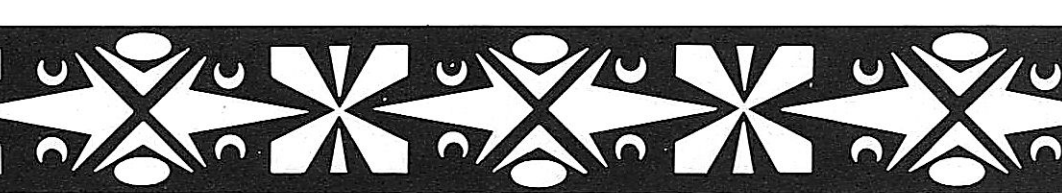
Nearly 1000 years ago in Baghdad, an ambi-

tious young woman named Fatima grew up as the only child of a widowed vizier in the court of the caliph. The vizier devoted himself to making her his heir, and to this end, he disguised her as a man, calling her Faisal, so that none would deny her the right to inherit. He also set about teaching her all his knowledge. But the vizier's daughter was not satisfied. Soon she turned to studying the black arts in secret, and as time passed, she used her growing empathic powers to gain an ever-increasing control over the caliphate, largely through domination of the caliph himself. During this time, the caliphate prospered, even in the shadow of the Turks, but dark things stalked the land, and the common people lived in fear.

Eventually, another vizier came to recognize the evil in Faisal, and he secretly called a great wizard, Ahmed Mustafa, for aid. Hearing of Faisal's fascination with opals, Mustafa came disguised as a gem merchant, and he soon learned that Faisal had discovered a means of using opals to open portals into other realms, dark realms from which horrors could be unleashed, and realms in which Faisal's enemies could be imprisoned. At great risk, Mustafa stole one of those opals and learned the secret of the portals himself, then set a trap for Faisal.

Mustafa purchased a huge black opal with red veinings—the Heart of Darkness—and he empathically attuned himself to the portals it could open. Then he presented the gem to Faisal, knowing "he" could never refuse so magnificent a stone. As Faisal took it, Mustafa sprang his trap. He opened a portal to a dimension that would draw Faisal's mind from its body and imprison it forever, leaving Faisal's body to waste away. But the vizier did not realize the full extent of Faisal's empathic power.

At the last moment, Faisal was able to shunt her mind into a proto-dimension tangential to the one Mustafa had prepared. From there, she could still exert an influence upon the Earth, although with



great difficulty. Her first act was to draw the wizard's mind into the trap with her and consume it. With the boost in power this gave her, she forged a link with her body, placing it into a state of suspended animation, so that it would not die before she could escape her prison. Then she set about using what little energy remained to her to bend her underlings toward working for her release. In this way, the cult of the Servants of the Dark Lady (or Cult of Fatima) was born, and it has been in existence ever since.

The cult's primary task is to safeguard the body of Fatima. Its members are also to maintain contact with the Heart of Darkness, although they do not actually *guard* it. Instead, the Heart is allowed to wander where it will, being traded from hand to hand, yet always under the influence of Fatima and her empathic powers. Finally, the cultists collect opals into which Fatima can imprison other empathic minds and enslave them, allowing her to bend their powers toward her goal of escape.

In the millennium since her imprisonment, Fatima has grown nearly strong enough to open the Heart once again, escape from it, rejoin her body, and restore it to life. As she grows stronger, the Heart grows more active in its travels, and the stories surrounding it increase in drama.

But Ahmed Mustafa had friends. To the wisest of them he had entrusted a written account of his plans for "Faisal." When Mustafa disappeared (the Cult of Fatima fed his body to the dogs), these friends swore an oath to continue Mustafa's work, to make certain that "Faisal" never returns. To ensure this, they formed a society of magicians, calling themselves the Brothers of Ahmed. For the past 10 centuries, the Brothers of Ahmed have been dogging the Cult of Fatima's heels, rooting out its influence wherever they find it, and studying to find a way of ending its threat forever. (During this time, they have, of course, learned that "Faisal" is actually Fatima.)

In *Heart of Darkness*, the player characters become aware of the existence of the stone, and as they investigate its powers, they become continually more enmeshed in Fatima's plot to escape from her proto-dimensional prison. In this adventure, the



PCs will travel to various cities while investigating stories of the Heart's appearances. Along the way, they will begin to discover clues concerning the Cult of Fatima and the Brothers of Ahmed, and they will find pieces of the Amulet of Ahmed, which will make them instrumental in the climactic battle between the two groups when Fatima eventually escapes. They will also stumble across unrelated evils, from a ravenous creature of the Australian bushmen's Dream Time, to the cold-blooded callousness of a Nazi prison-camp commander. Inevitably, their own powers and their understanding of the world of Dark Conspiracy will increase tremendously as a result.

GETTING THE PCS INVOLVED

There are a number of ways of getting the PCs involved in this adventure. If they are used to



following up on tabloid stories—to find the grain of truth behind the hoopla—then you can give them a photocopy of page 4 and let them begin investigating the two tales mentioned there.

Another way to get them involved is to have them find mention of the Heart, the Cult of Fatima, or the Brothers of Ahmed during the course of some other investigation they are conducting, during another adventure, for example.

Or perhaps one of the PCs' many contacts can mention a legend about one of the three to the PCs. The legend need not even be true. As long as the PCs become aware of the opal or one of the groups involved with it, that should suffice to encourage them to dig up more information.

Finally, the PCs could be approached by the Brothers of Ahmed themselves. In this case, the Brothers have decided that they need to use people whom the Cult of Fatima will not recognize, in order to find out where the Heart is at the present. In this case, the society will most likely contact the PCs under the guise of their fronting operation, the Oyama Corporation. The PCs will not be told the history of the gem, but will merely be hired to track it down.

It is probably best, however, if the PCs have begun their own investigation, and are *then* contacted by the Brothers of Ahmed. Certainly the society will quickly become aware of the PCs' investigation, and after checking them out and finding that the PCs are opposed to the forces of evil, they would be interested in guiding and aiding the PCs in their task. Whether the society identifies itself as the Oyama Corporation or the Brothers of Ahmed will depend, in this case, on how knowledgeable the PCs are when contacted. Inexperienced PCs with little knowledge would be approached by Oyama; experienced PCs by the Brothers.

Most importantly, the PCs and the Brothers of Ahmed need to be aware of each other and be working in cooperation in order for the PCs to be involved in the final, climactic battle with the Cult of Fatima. As long as the referee ensures that the PCs meet the Brothers before that point, the adventure will run smoothly. Of course, the earlier the PCs meet the Brothers, the more aid they will be able to receive along the way.

VISITING THE CITIES

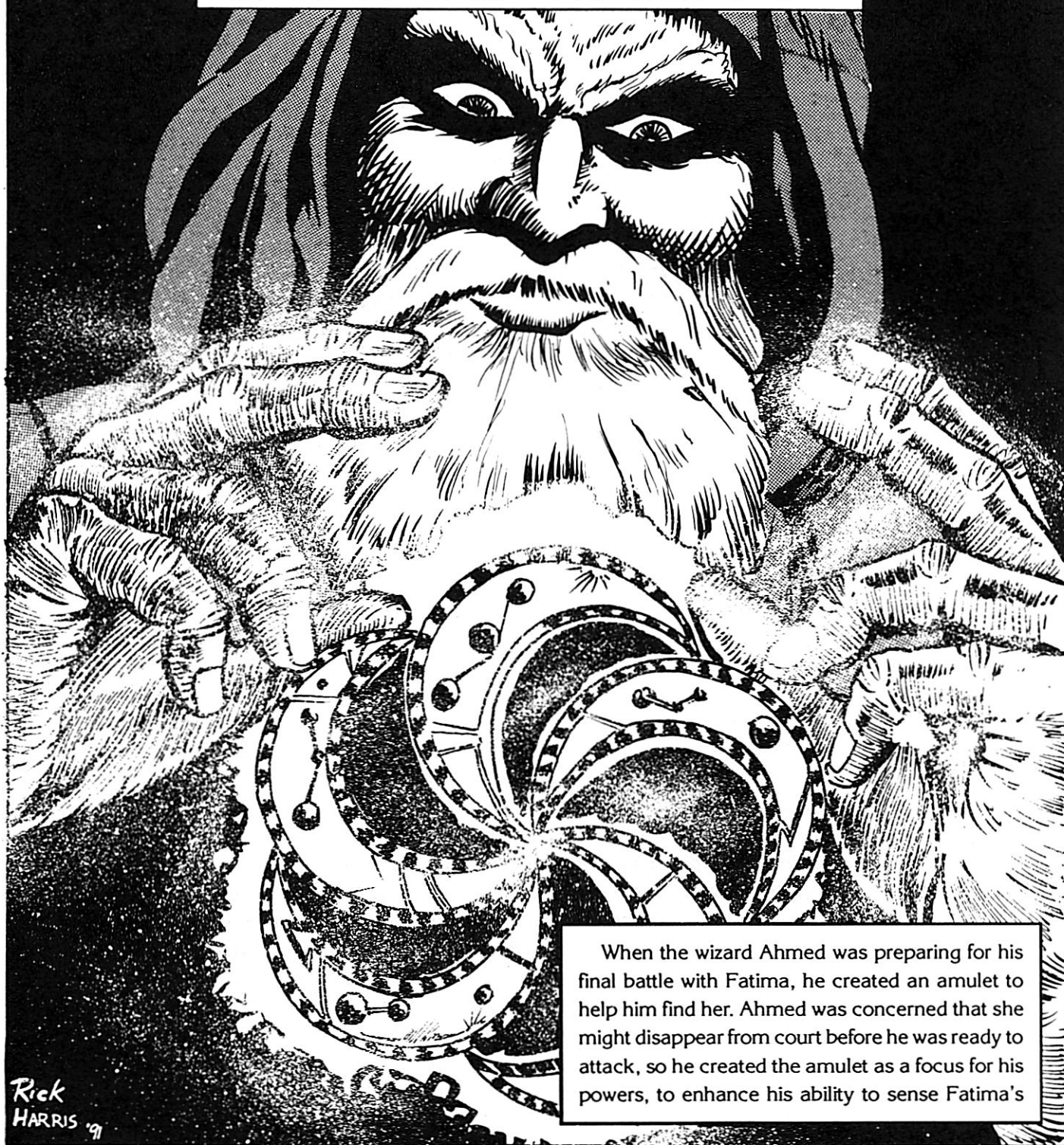
There are five cities listed as locations where the Heart of Darkness has been sighted: Sydney, Australia; Baghdad, Iraq; Hong Kong; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Isa, Nigeria. Each has important clues to be found concerning the Heart. Chances are, the players will choose to follow up the clues in chronological order, checking on the most recent clues first, so this is the order in which they are listed in the book.

If you wish to extend the length of this adventure or incorporate it more fully into an existing campaign, you can add additional cities, as well. Cities added should provide some interaction with the events surrounding the Heart of Darkness, but pieces of the Amulet of Ahmed will only be found in the five cities listed.

As always, referees are encouraged to adapt and change this adventure in any other way deemed necessary to most successfully make it serve their roleplaying groups.



THE AMULET OF AHMED



When the wizard Ahmed was preparing for his final battle with Fatima, he created an amulet to help him find her. Ahmed was concerned that she might disappear from court before he was ready to attack, so he created the amulet as a focus for his powers, to enhance his ability to sense Fatima's

Rick
HARRIS '91



empathic aura. When Fatima psychically attacked him and dealt his death blow, Ahmed poured the last of his power into the amulet even as he died. As a result, the amulet is almost a living entity in its own right, but one that is specifically drawn to Fatima's essence. The closer the amulet comes to Fatima, the stronger its psychic pull.

Ahmed's Amulet is composed of five silver crescent moons which fit together to form a circular design, somewhat like a flower or a windmill with five blades. Individually, the pieces of the amulet look like unusual but very pretty jewelry.

The wizard had the amulet with him when he returned to Baghdad to confront Fatima, but it was not on his body when the Brotherhood retrieved what remained of his body after the dogs had gnawed it. The Brotherhood assumed that the amulet had been destroyed. In fact, it was stolen by a minor courtier in the caliph's court. The amulet was disassembled into its five component pieces and made into necklace pendants. They were originally given to some of the man's mistresses, but they have changed hands innumerable times over the years. The Brotherhood remains unaware that the amulet still exists; the Servants of the Dark Lady are ignorant both of its existence and its abilities.

Each portion of the amulet acts as a homing device pointing to the Heart of Darkness. It locates Fatima's essence rather than her physical body. Thus, as long as she remains imprisoned in the Heart of Darkness, the amulet will pull its wielders toward the opal. If Fatima were released from the stone, however, it would lead them to her physical body. The amulet acts by providing its owners with a hunch, a stray thought, an impression, or even a dream that the stone has been in a certain place and some sense of how recently it was there. The effect is compounded when more than one piece is in the same place. A single piece will only give very vague impressions; when all five pieces are together, the pull is very, very strong.

The following effects will be noticed by the characters as they retrieve pieces of the amulet: (1) If they have one piece, they will only receive a vague

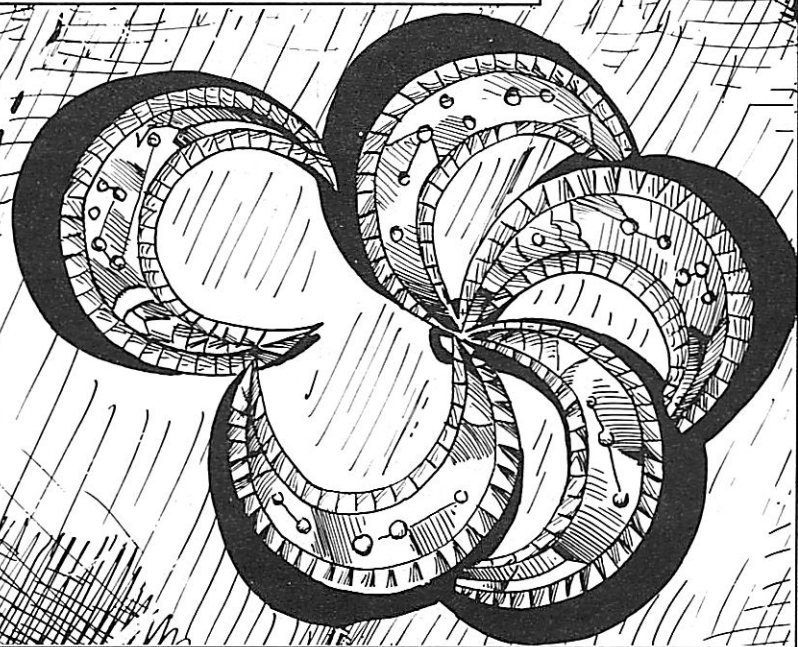
impression of whether or not the stone has ever been in a place when they visit it. (2) If they have two pieces of the amulet, and assemble them, the PCs will also gain a sense of how long it has been since the stone has been in the locations they visit. This sense will be vague: They will know that it has been hundreds of years but not that it has been 367 years exactly, for instance. (3) If they assemble three pieces of the amulet, these impressions will become stronger and a little more specific. The PCs might actually know that the stone was in a certain area of a city, for instance. (4) If the PCs assemble four pieces of the amulet, the impressions will become still stronger. Now they will sense whether or not the stone has been in a specific building or area. The time sense also becomes much more accurate, identifying the amulet's presence within weeks. (5) If the PCs assemble all five pieces of the amulet, they begin receiving incredibly strong impressions. If the wielder concentrates on the location of the Heart of Darkness, all people within three meters of the amulet find themselves in the portal of another dimension leading directly to the Heart of Darkness. See "The Dark Lady Returns" (pages 53-58), for more details.

Besides the effects listed above, possession of even one piece of the amulet can lead the owner to the other pieces. A successful Average test of Empathy reveals an impression of the direction and distance to the next nearest piece.

If the characters describe the pieces of the amulet to Tanomoshi (current head of the Brothers of Ahmed—see "The Brothers of Ahmed Speak," pages 11-15), he immediately recognizes it for what it is. Like the rest of the Brothers of Ahmed, he assumed that it was destroyed, but realizes that it can be a valuable tool in tracking down Fatima. He offers the characters a \$10,000 bonus each if they can manage to recover the entire amulet and return it to him.

Note that once the amulet is placed near the Heart of Darkness, it becomes inactive: Its sole purpose is to point to Fatima, and once it has located her, it goes dormant.

THE BROTHERS OF AHMED SPEAK



At some point during the adventure, the player characters are going to come to the attention of the Brothers of Ahmed, and eventually—in order for them to be included in the climactic battle against the Cult of Fatima—the PCs will need to be working with the Brothers of Ahmed. Most likely, the Brothers will approach the PCs under the guise of the Oyama Corporation and attempt to hire them to retrieve the Heart of Darkness. If the PCs refuse to hire out to a corporation for such a mission, or if they have established a sufficient reputation as Dark Minion hunters to have gained the Brothers' respect, the group will reveal itself to the PCs for what it is: an Oriental secret society dedicated to thwarting the Cult of Fatima.

This chapter details that first meeting between the Brothers and the PCs. Referees should insert it into the adventure wherever seems appropriate, and adapt it as necessary to suit the actions of their own PCs. Note that the most probable adaptations will be: (1) Tanomoshi (see below) will reveal up front that he is representing the Brothers of Ahmed; and (2) He will know that the PCs are already aware

of the Heart of Darkness, in which case he will simply answer questions about it, rather than giving the lecture outlined below.

THE CONTACT

To initiate contact with the Brothers of Ahmed, one of the PCs gets a phone call from a Mrs. Masatani, a secretary at the Oyama Corporation. She says that a Mr. Tanomoshi would like to speak with the members of the party. Mrs. Masatani is secretary to the director of the Outside Vendor Services Division of Oyama Corporation. She doesn't volunteer this information, but if the PCs ask, she tells them that Outside Vendor Services is the branch of Oyama which hires temporary employees for jobs outside normal corporate boundaries. This division generally hires only two categories of people: those with a high turnover rate or unusually high temporary demand (secretaries, cooks for the corporate cafeteria, etc.) and those with specialized or technical skills a corporation only occasionally needs—espionage skills, for instance. Mrs. Masatani doesn't know what kind of job they would be doing,



but the PCs will probably guess that it's the latter.

Players will know (on an Easy test of their character's Intelligence) that the Oyama Corporation is one of the 25 largest corporations in the world. Oyama has a reputation for treating its mercs decently and paying them well. The corp hires mercs all the time, so there are no specific clues that would give the PCs a hint about this job. To find out what it is, the PCs will just have to wait until they're told.

GETTING TO OYAMA

If the PCs agree to an interview, they will need to travel to San Francisco, the home city of Oyama's US branch. If necessary, plane tickets can be delivered to them by an Oyama courier, and they will fly to San Francisco on Oyama Airlines. Reservations are made in their names at the Oyama Hotel on the bay in east San Francisco. You get the idea: Oyama is quite a presence in this area.

The hotel is just across the street from Oyama's US headquarters, and the PCs will be flown in the evening before the interview. They may spend the evening any way they wish but they will not be able to find out any information about the job they are interviewing for. They will be able to learn any of the information about the Oyama Corporation which is public knowledge, however. (See The Oyama Corporation on page 62.)

THE INTERVIEW

After a brief wait in the reception area, the PCs are escorted into Mr. Tanomoshi's office, a huge room with a spectacular view of the bay—and Oakland beyond—through a glass window that covers the entire wall behind a massive desk (solid teak, of course). A three-paneled Japanese screen stands in a far corner of the room; the PCs hear a man's voice from behind it telling them he'll be right out.

When Tanomoshi steps out from behind the screen, the characters are in for a surprise. Tanomoshi is not Japanese! He's over six feet tall, he's blond and he speaks English with a slight Texas twang. "Ah-so!" Tanomoshi says. "You are surprise I speak

your language!" and laughs. One of the PCs will recognize Tanomoshi as a government contact from long ago (the referee should choose the most appropriate PC, and give that character this contact *in addition to* those he or she already has). Back then, however, the man's name was Douglas Campbell. Tanomoshi/Campbell and the PC can engage in some small talk regarding their mutual past to set the scene: "I haven't seen you since you were working at the computer lab in Berkeley!" "I thought you'd still be with the CIA," etc.

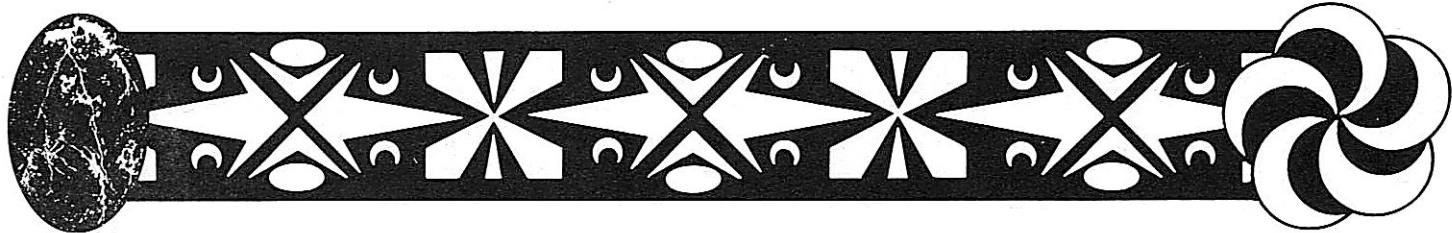
In answer to any questions about why he isn't Campbell (nor government) any more, Tanomoshi explains: "Listen, I took four years of Japanese in college, lived there for two years, got an MBA from Harvard—and couldn't get a job higher than mail clerk with any of the Japanese corps. So I chose a name I liked, called the recruiter and interviewed with him over the phone. He was about as surprised as you are."

"Oyama wants people who understand them, who have the same cultural background they do. When I'm on the phone, no one can tell I wasn't born in Osaka."

(If no one asks about the name and occupation change, referees can volunteer the information or not as they see fit. It might be more fun to just let the PCs wonder.)

"But enough of that," Tanomoshi says. "Let's talk business." He walks over to the screen he emerged from and shifts the panels to reveal a projection screen. The lights do down, and a panel in the opposite wall slides down to reveal a slide projector. The slide it shows is of a portrait done in the style of an old Dutch master. It shows a turbaned and bearded man seated in a formal pose. In his right hand he holds a black gem about the size of a large man's fist.

"You've probably never seen this painting before," Tanomoshi says. "There are a lot of art historians out there who don't even know it exists. It's called *Portrait of Sultan Suleiman*, and it was done by a little-known Dutch painter. The man was a genius, and if he'd lived beyond his twenties you'd



see his work in the galleries with the other Dutch masters.

"Sultan Suleiman was a figure in the court of Baghdad in the 17th century. Historians suspect that the artist actually saw Suleiman at some point. It is known that the artist traveled in the Middle East—as I hear it, the reason for travel involved the daughter of a prominent Amsterdam banker—and painted his subjects from memory at night. The locals marveled at his landscapes, but their religion prohibited 'graven images' of human figures. This may have been part of the reason for the painter's imprisonment. He was held for several months and then released. Immediately thereafter, he returned to Amsterdam but was never physically strong after his stay in Baghdad's prisons. He died a few years later.

"I want you to take special note of this." Tanomoshi presses a button on his desk, and the slide changes to show an enlarged detail of the gem in the figure's right hand. "It's an opal, one of the finest known. Although there are larger stones, this one is of an unusually high quality. The gem is called the Heart of Darkness, because of its deep black color laced with streaks of red." He points to these features on the slide.

"We are very interested in this opal. Our gem collection will be the cornerstone of an exhibit in the boardroom of our new headquarters in Tokyo. We wish to add this stone to the collection. We will pay your expenses, provide you with tools and equipment and pay you \$20,000 apiece if you are successful in this endeavor. What do you say?"

If the PCs immediately agree, continue the briefing as outlined. If they ask questions, the referee should answer as honestly as possible, but keeping in mind that Tanomoshi will not actually volunteer any information the PCs do not specifically ask for. He will, however, reply truthfully to direct queries. If pressed by a character with a high Bargain skill, he may be willing to go as high as \$30,000, but no farther.

If the PCs are already aware of the Heart and know something of its evil reputation—in which case

DOUGLAS CAMPBELL/ AKIRO TANOMOSHI

Tanomoshi is nearly two meters tall, weighs only 59 kilograms ("skinny as a rail" would describe him properly), and he has thick brown hair and a bushy moustache. He looks very much like he just stepped off the bus from west Texas—and though he is a native of Lubbock, he's nobody's fool. Tanomoshi is also very strong. His favorite sport as a child was out-wrestling his five older brothers (singly or several at a time), and anyone else who didn't think the skinny kid could cut it.

Level: Experienced

Attributes: 5; Strength 7

Skills: 4; Japanese 8, Business 6, Bargain 5

Initiative: 3

Motivation: *King of Hearts:* Tanomoshi's primary motivation is a sense of honor, focused particularly on making sure the Cult of Fatima is defeated. *Ten of Spades:* His years of working for a Japanese megacorp have caused their ideals of hard work and integrity to rub off on him.



Tanomoshi will have revealed himself as an operative of the Brothers of Ahmed, and Oyama as its front—Tanomoshi will tell them that the Brothers want the stone in order to thwart the Cult of Fatima. Unless the PCs have *terribly* impressive reputations, he will *not* reveal to them that the Brothers believe Fatima is on the verge of escaping her proto-dimensional prison.

TANOMOSHI'S HISTORY

The story Tanomoshi tells the characters about his early years with the corporation is true—as far as it goes. He worked in the mail room for one of Oyama's rivals before he decided to interview over



the phone—in fluent Japanese. After he was hired, members of the Brothers of Ahmed sensed latent empathic powers in him, and invited him to join their order. Tanomoshi learned fast, rising quickly in their ranks, as well as in his position with Oyama.

THE BRIEFING

After filling the PCs in on the Heart of Darkness (with however much information he decides to give), Tanomoshi proceeds to brief them concerning the help they can expect from Oyama.

"We will provide you with all of the leads we have available," he says. "These are primarily news clippings and the like from sightings of the stone. You will have access to general information from our data banks. We will outfit you with any tools you need, including a computer, corporate travel vouchers and hand weapons. I'm sure that I need not warn you about misusing any of these items."

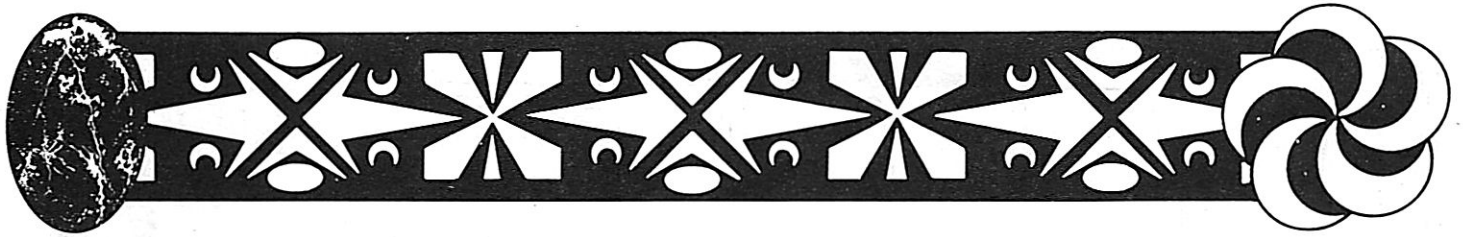
Tanomoshi will answer any questions the PCs might have, then produce contracts to be signed. (A corporation never does anything without sufficient paperwork, but in departments like Tanomoshi's, the contracts are usually either very routine or very unusual.) He shakes hands with each of the PCs and then has an employee escort them to the arsenal to

choose their weapons. Like most other large corporations, Oyama has its own private security force (a polite term for *army*), so the PCs will be able to outfit themselves with any weapons they fancy, from hunting knives to LAWs. They can also check out items like first aid kits, bulletproof vests, walkie-talkies, etc. The PCs are restricted to items they can carry themselves and physically take on a plane. Tanomoshi explains that at the end of the mission they will be expected to return the equipment or to file a report for any item that was used up or lost.

There will be no problems with getting transportation—the PCs will be traveling on Oyama Airways throughout their trips and will have the appropriate permits—but they won't be allowed to take extra weapons to replace those they might lose in the course of the adventure. (If the players protest, remind them that Oyama has branches all over the world and can get replacements to the PCs by next-day air at the latest. This is also true of ammunition and other tools such as plastic explosives or another computer.)

The PC who is to serve as computer operator will be instructed separately in the use of the laptop given to the group. The files of available information are either in the computer itself or on a CD-ROM





assigned to the computer expert when the group was issued its equipment.

The group leader will be provided with \$15,000 in cash for incidental expenses while looking for the Heart of Darkness. The accounting department will require receipts for any of the cash used.

Finally, each character is issued a corporate travel voucher. The vouchers are keyed to their individual thumbprints and cannot be used by anyone except the person they were issued to.

THE COMPUTER

When the PCs have outfitted themselves, or while the other characters are finishing choosing their equipment, the team's computer expert is taken to another area and briefed on the computer assigned to the group. This computer, the Oyama 786L, is a state-of-the-art machine. It has one gigabyte of memory, CD-ROM and erasable optical disk access, and can connect directly to Oyamanet, the corp's communications system, from any phone in the world. It has no screen; instead, a pop-up holographic display projects from the top of the computer, showing a virtual 30-by-30 centimeter display. For privacy, there is also a set of goggles the character can wear which project a holographic image directly onto the retina and, in addition, can show certain objects in stereoscopic detail. The 786L is about the size of a computer keyboard from the mid-1980s (about 45-by-15 centimeters), and weighs less than two pounds.

Oyamanet

In the world of *Dark Conspiracy*, information is power—and sometimes, quite literally, money. Those who have the best access to information have the most power.

Oyamanet began as a local office network for executives of Oyama in Osaka. As Oyama grew and opened branches around the world, Oyamanet grew with it. Today it maintains communications among Oyama branches around the world, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

There are actually several sections to Oyamanet,

including two corporate video channels: one for employees and their families (complete with Saturday morning cartoons and bad sitcoms), and another one for business communications, board meetings, etc. (Each carries audio sub-bands in several languages.) Oyamanet also carries one audio service and a satellite-linked data network, OCOM. The Oyama hotels the PCs stay in carry OVID-I (the *entertainment* video network).

OCOM is the network the characters will be most interested in, of course. Through it, they can access data files, receive network mail, send out requests for help, and so forth. Each local Oyama office has an OCOM *node* which offers on-line information, interoffice mail, and so forth. Mail and information requests for other offices are sent through the OCOM satellite system. Because of transmission lag time and the volume of interoffice mail, it can take anywhere from several minutes to days for an OCOM satellite office to respond to requests from outside offices, depending on the priority of the message.

Request Priority

Player characters will not usually know how requests and messages are arranged in priority. (An Average roll against Computer Operation will reveal that priority of user requests is judged by corporate board members. Requests are further sorted by subject.) Information not available at the user's local node will be released in priority order. If they ask, the PCs will be told they have standard Priority 20 status. This is the usual priority code for day-to-day business operations. In reality, however, they have been assigned Priority 3. This means that all of their actions and requests will be routed directly to Mr. Tanomoshi. He will personally decide what information will be released and what actions will be taken.

Any of the information in the "Research Results" section, pages 62-63, is available through the computer, but remember that the PCs will only receive answers to the questions that they ask. They will be told "No information is available" if there is no reference material on a subject.



If the PCs are working with Oyama Corporation/Brothers of Ahmed, they will have no trouble at all in getting to Sydney. Their travel vouchers, when run through the card reader at Oyama's counter in the San Francisco airport, get them red-carpet treatment, free entry into Oyama's private waiting area, first-class seats, gourmet meals aboard the plane—the works. Upon arriving at the airport in Sydney the PCs will be whisked to the Sydney Oyama Hotel, overlooking the harbor and its famous opera house. The room has a direct port into Oyamanet, so the group's computer specialist will have no trouble accessing available information on the city or on the Heart of Darkness. The local Oyamanet node's file on the Heart of Darkness goes into a little more detail about the gem exhibit than what is available in San Francisco.

If, instead, the PCs are working on their own at this point, they will have to arrange their own transportation and lodgings, of course. Information similar to that on the Oyamanet will be available on an

Average test of Computer Operations. The referee should require a separate roll for each subject title the PCs come up with, but they can continue to make attempts as long as they come up with reasonable titles to search for. (For instance, the Heart of Darkness could be found under "Heart of Darkness," "Darkness, Heart of," "Famous Gems," "Museum Thefts," and the like.)

INFORMATION FROM OYAMANET Police Baffled at Mysterious Disappearance of Gem!

SYDNEY, (The Oyamanet date stamp for this article is one to two weeks before the current date of the campaign.) (ONS)—

Metropolitan Police still have no clues today in the disappearance of a rare gem from an exhibit in the New South Wales Museum of Natural History.

The gem, a black and red opal believed to be the legendary Heart of Darkness, was last seen in its



display case when the museum closed at 8:00 p.m. yesterday.

"At this point, we're completely baffled," Museum Director John Bellingham said today. "There are no prints and no signs of forced entry. We honestly have no idea how the thief got in."

Bellingham would not comment on the possibility that the theft was an inside job, except to say that, as a routine precaution, the entire museum staff was being requested to submit to polygraph tests.

"The Heart of Darkness was quite valuable," said Joey Miller, a Sydney mineral expert. "Any gem opal that size would be worth quite a bit of money, but this one was special for two reasons."

"First, it's a rare color combination—a very deep black, laced with blood-red streaks—and of exceptional clarity. You don't find many opals like that. Second, it's one of those gems that has a story behind it. When any gem is surrounded by stories of bad luck, it becomes even more desirable to many collectors."

Asked whether anyone would want the opal badly enough to steal it, Miller said, "People who take a fancy to such items can usually afford to hire others to steal them, and usually don't mind doing so. Whoever did this was very good."

A local mine owner, Winston Smythe, concurred with Miller on the value of the stone. "You rarely find stones of this quality," he stated.

THE NPCS IN SYDNEY

The characters have three main options in searching for the Heart of Darkness in Sydney. They can question Joey Miller, the gem expert; John Bellingham, the museum curator; and/or Winston Smythe, who owns several opal mines.

VISITING JOEY MILLER

If the PCs ask around Sydney, and if they are charismatic or open-handed enough to overcome the normal antagonism toward strangers, they'll discover that lots of people know Joey. Responses to their queries will range from "Oh, yeah, the rock man" to "Joey? You've got to be kidding! Everybody

JOSEPH "JOEY" MILLER

Joey is 47 years old, has prematurely white hair and is five feet tall. He has blue eyes. His hands are calloused from years of rock climbing, but they're also very skillful: Joey does beautiful lapidary work. He is friendly and good-natured and generally likes people. This is apparent from his tone of voice and body language.



In many ways, Joey could be considered the typical Australian—a regular bloke, always ready with a "G'day, mate," always smiling, ready to lend a hand. He was born in Fairfield, a suburb of Sydney, but likes the mountains of the Great Dividing Range better.

When he was six, Joey's uncle took him on a rock-hunting expedition. Joey caught "rock pox" immediately, and from then on he spent every hour he could scouring the Range for new stones for his collection. At 10 he was already an accomplished lapidary; at 13 he won an all-New South Wales prize for gemcraft; and at 16 he had a successful mail-order business in stones and supplies.

No one calls him anything but Joey. If anyone mentions the name "Joseph" or "Mr. Miller," he explains that his father is retired. Joey never had any formal schooling after high school, though he had scholarship offers from the geological departments of nine schools (including three in the United States). He claimed he could learn anything he needed to know on his own—and indeed, he's proven that true. In the last 15 years Joey has gone on gem-hunting expeditions to France, Switzerland, China, the United States, Bolivia and Africa, in addition to his regular trips in Australia.

Any gem collector in Australia will tell the characters, "Joey's the best." Most other rock hounds around the world will say he's the best in Australia, and everyone allows as how they wish they could do a tenth of what he does.

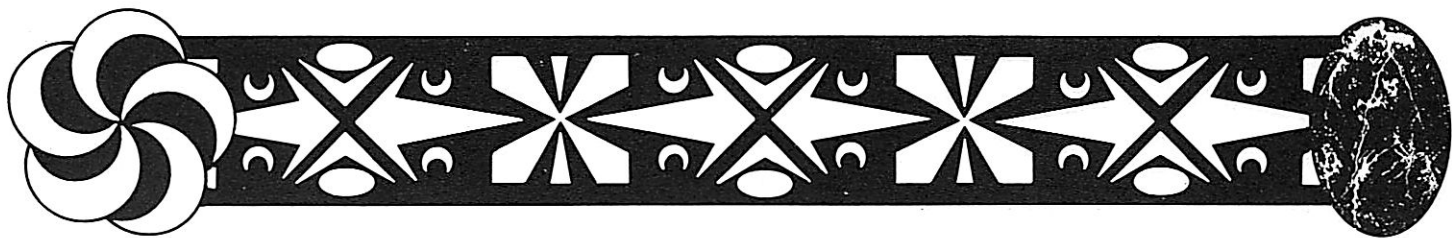
Experience: Novice

Attributes: 5; Constitution 6, Intelligence 7

Skills: 2; Business 5, Climbing 6, Observation 6, Persuasion 3

Initiative: 2

Motivation: *King of Hearts:* Joey is an honorable man. He is scrupulously honest in all of his business dealings. *Seven of Spades:* He is somewhat ambitious, but not overly so. He does take pride in his work and skills.



knows Joey.” His shop is easy to find—it’s on a side street in an older section of downtown, between a storefront church and an abandoned bakery. If the PCs want to talk to Joey, they need to go to the store; Joey seldom leaves it, except to go rock-hunting. In fact, he lives in a small apartment above the shop.

The Gem Shop

When they get to Miller’s shop, the PCs will find it to be fairly large but very dingy and dirty. The store seems crowded: There are only about two dozen people in it, but they are speaking in three or four languages. Several salespersons are behind the counter, but the customers tend to gravitate toward one white-haired man, about five feet tall, at the rear of the store. It’s fairly easy to guess that this is Joey.

The store is built in a U-shape, with Joey occupying the foot of the U. The U is made up of open bins displaying “pretty” stones, the kind that look nice but aren’t worth much, fronting glass cabinets

which display more valuable gems. Behind the counter, in individual cases, are the costlier stones.

After the party has had a chance to get into the store and look around, one of the salesmen comes up and asks if he can help them. If they tell him directly that they want to talk to Joey, the salesman smiles and says, “Who doesn’t? Just a bit, mates, I’ll see if I can get him free for a moment.”

If they indicate a connection with Oyama, the clerk smiles and says, in effect, that being a corp doesn’t cut any ice with Joey, but he’ll be glad to talk to you all the same.

The employee excuses himself, whispers in Joey’s ear, then goes to wait on other customers—but still keeps an eye on the party. (This is just a reflex action—the help is trained to keep an eye out for shoplifters—but if the referee can make it look like the hired help is keeping more of an eye on them than would be normal, it will increase their paranoia.)

After a few minutes, Joey breaks loose of the group he was with and makes his way over to the PCs. “Joey Miller,” he introduces himself and sticks out a calloused paw. “What can I do for you?”

If the characters mention the Heart of Darkness, or more than a business interest in other opals, Joey suggests that they meet in his office. He won’t talk about the gem in public.

Speaking with Joey

Once they’re in the office, with the door shut, Joey will still strike the PCs as an amiable fellow—but he’s a combination of irritated and flattered that everyone in the world who wants to know about opals comes to him. If the characters ask, he tells them that he’s been a rock hound all his life, and in the last 30 years at least three dozen people have asked him how they can find the Heart of Darkness. Arabs, usually, but Japanese, Americans, you name it. If the characters ask who some of these people are, he replies: “I didn’t ask for identification, mates—no more than I asked you,” and grins. “I don’t care unless I’m selling my goods.”

He says that most of the requests for information





came shortly after the robbery at the Museum of Natural History. He had come into possession of a gem (he refuses to say how—"Sorry, mates, but there's some things a gentleman never reveals") which he believed to be the Heart of Darkness. Because so many people were interested in it, he arranged for a showing at the museum (a fairly easy feat, considering that he had been friends with the museum director, John Bellingham, for years and had arranged four exhibits for him in the past) and figured he would have potential bidders contact him after the exhibit was finished. That would net him the highest possible price for the stone.

As part of the exhibit, he arranged for several other artifacts to be displayed along with the gem, including a silver pendant he found with the stone.

Joey's only interest in the exhibit was displaying the stone and collecting a fee for arranging the exhibit. Although he did receive an insurance settlement through the museum, the amount was less than half of what he expected to be able to sell the gem for. He has no idea where it might be now, and if the characters suggest that he might have stolen it himself, he gets very insulted. Unless they apologize immediately, he'll call some of his cronies in to escort them out of the store.

If the PCs ask about the pendant, he tells them it is still on display at the museum. They can ask Bellingham about it, Joey says, but they'd best not expect much result. Bellingham is a good administrator, but "if he don't know you and he don't want money from you, he won't talk much."

If the characters ask about whether the stone he exhibited was really the Heart of Darkness, Joey sits back in his chair, lets out his breath, then sits upright and looks at them. "Listen, mates," he says, "I've made a bit of a study on the Heart. Its trail went cold a long time ago. I can't say for sure that the gem I exhibited was the Heart of Darkness, but then I can't say it wasn't, and it fit all the descriptions I've ever heard. I never made any representation either way, and there's people that would be willing to pay money for it if I told them it was the Hope Diamond, just because they liked the look of it."

VISITING THE MUSEUM

When the PCs visit the museum, if they've visited Joey first, they find that Bellingham is exactly as advertised. He is businesslike and cordial, but unimpressed with any of the characters or their credentials—unless one of them is a paleontologist or museum administrator, or is willing to make a sizable donation to the museum, in which case Bellingham comes alive.

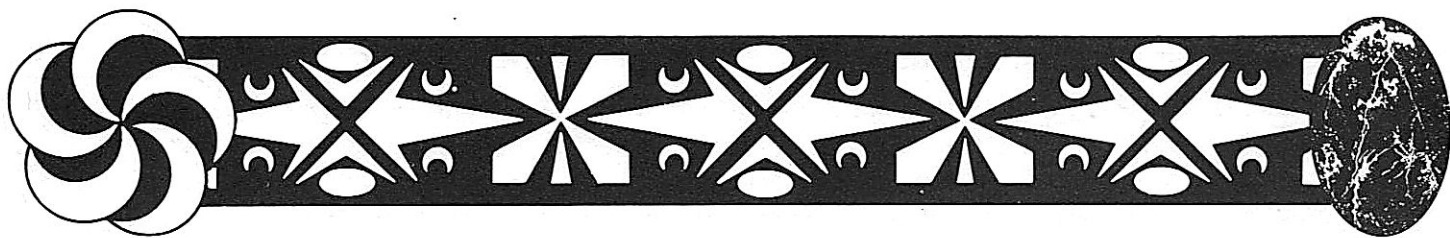
Bellingham actually knows very little about the robbery. The museum was staffed by its usual complement of four night guards: Fitch, Martinson, Willoughby and Carter. All four took polygraph tests the day after the robbery, and all came across clean.

All four of the security guards would have had access to the room with the Heart of Darkness that night. It was displayed in the Gems and Minerals Room in the east wing of the museum. Bellingham designates a security guard named Fitch to take the characters to the case where the Heart of Darkness was exhibited.

Fitch is a tall, strong-looking man, getting a bit paunchy around the middle, but otherwise in good shape. He's been working at the museum for over 20 years, and is currently assistant chief of security. He'll probably be chief of security when Fincannon, the current chief, retires. (If the PCs want to speak to Fincannon, they may, but he can provide them with no more information about the robbery than Bellingham or Fitch could.)

"Willoughby would have been the security chief before much longer," Fitch continues, "if he hadn't killed himself. Funny thing—he was always in great spirits. Never let anything get him down. I'm not saying he didn't have both feet on the ground, mind you. Just that he always seemed able to see past trouble to the silver lining, if you know what I mean." To the best of Fitch's knowledge, Willoughby had no living relatives.

Fitch enjoys talking, but won't say much about the security measures. This is company policy—they don't want to give away any information that would assist potential future thieves. But any PC



JOHN BELLINGHAM

John Bellingham is 58 years old. He's tall (190 centimeters) and slender, has a full head of gray hair, and is a meticulous dresser. He is soft-spoken and very professional.

Bellingham has been the curator of the New South Wales Museum of Natural History for nearly 15 years. His first love in life is the museum. He is himself a paleontologist by training, and being curator of the museum has made him very down-to-earth. Belling-

ham is always on the lookout for people to contribute to the museum and is an expert at convincing others to join him in his cause. Although a practical businessman where the museum is concerned, Bellingham tends to see everything and everyone only in terms of their relationship to his needs. If he perceives no value to the museum, he is polite but aloof.

Experience: Novice

Attributes: 5; INT 7, EDU 8, CHR 6

Skills: 2; Business 5, Bargain 6, Greek 4, Latin 4

Initiative: 2

Motivation: *Six of Spades:* Bellingham is moderately ambitious. He wants his museum to do well but is content to stay in Sydney; he isn't looking to move on to a larger or more prestigious museum. Bellingham likes being the big fish in his medium-sized pond. *Four of Clubs:* Bellingham is also aggressive, though not usually violent. He will push hard to try to get what he wants.

who makes an Average roll against Observation will notice systems like electric eyes, cameras, ultrasound generators and motion sensors. Such characters will also notice security stations along the walls, which contain the keys security guards use for updating the time clocks they carry (the museum's way of knowing that a guard checked a room at a specified time). The museum will not let the PCs see any security time sheets, but, if asked, will tell the characters that there were no discrepancies in the security guards' time records for the night in question.

The Gems and Minerals Room

Eventually the characters make it to the Gems and Minerals Room, where an exhibit on sedimentary rocks of Australia and the Pacific Basin is on display. In a back corner of the room, in a case by themselves, are two items. One is a silver pendant, the other a card which reads:

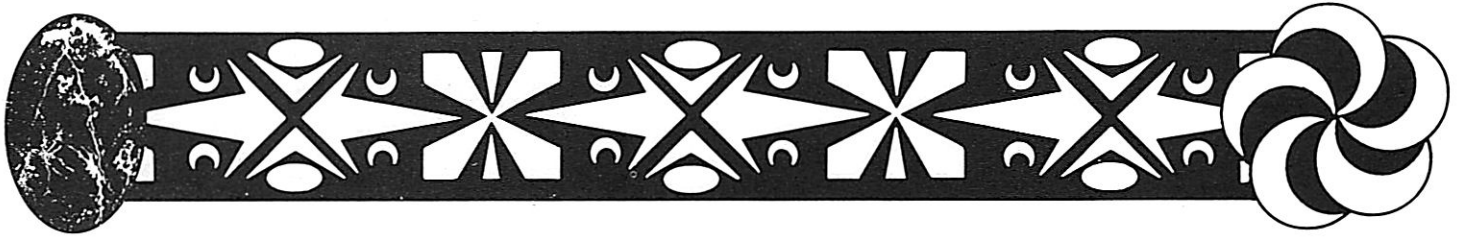
"This case contained an opal believed by reputable experts to be the Heart of Darkness, a legendary gem dating back to 10th-century Baghdad. The opal, a deep black with streaks of crimson, was stolen from this case on (give a date a week to two weeks before the current date), and has not yet been recovered.

"The silver pendant is believed to have been located with the Heart of Darkness. It was made nearly 1000 years ago and is an unusual design of excellent craftsmanship. Its designer is not known, but the high quality indicates that it was probably made for a wealthy individual.

"The pendant is a silver crescent moon with intricate engraving on its surface. It is hung on a fine silver chain which is probably far newer than the pendant itself. A pattern of tiny blue dots, looking very much like lapis lazuli, is worked into the design, and engraved lines appear to connect some of the dots. The overall effect looks rather like a field of stars. Perhaps the lines are meant to represent a constellation—but if so, it is not one that can be seen from Earth's skies."

The pendant is a portion of the Amulet of Ahmed (see pages 9-10). When the character in the party with the highest Empathy gets within six inches of the pendant, he or she sees a vision in which a man wearing a security guard uniform is bending over the case, then reaching in and removing the Heart. The character also senses a very strong "desire" in the amulet to be near the Heart. Other PCs with Empathy will also receive these impressions in varying degrees—the higher the rating, the stronger the impression. Characters with no Empathy will see nothing, no matter how hard they look.

If no one with an Empathy rating gets within six



inches of the case, as the PCs get ready to leave the room, the fragment will “call out” empathically to the player in the group with the highest Empathy.

Empathic characters will also get two other very strong impressions. First, they will know that the fragment is somehow connected with the Heart of Darkness. Second, they will catch a vision of a dark-haired woman. She is wearing Middle Eastern robes—but they’re a man’s robes. Still, from the way the wind whips her hair and blows the robe against her, her femininity is obvious. The vision lingers for a second, then fades.

Acquiring the Pendant

Convincing Bellingham to give the characters the silver pendant requires a Difficult roll versus Persuasion. The roll, however, becomes Average if the PCs tell Bellingham that they can probably find the Heart of Darkness with the aid of the fragment. It becomes Easy if they first persuade Mr. Tanomoshi to make a sizable donation (at least \$1000) to the museum from the Oyama Corporation. They can also offer such a donation from their own funds.

If the characters still can’t convince Bellingham to loan them the pendant, suggest that they mention the incident in their next report to Tanomoshi. If they do, he tells them to sit tight for a day or so, as he will have further information for them. The next afternoon, a courier appears at their hotel door with a package. Inside it is the silver amulet. If they ask, Tanomoshi will not explain how he convinced Bellingham to part with it. He just smiles if asked in person, and doesn’t reply if asked via OCOM.

Once a character with Empathy is able to touch the amulet, that PC again has the visions of both the opal and the woman in the dark robes. The character also senses that the Heart of Darkness has been very near this amulet not long ago. Any other impressions will be determined by the number of pieces of the amulet the group possesses by this time. (See “The Amulet of Ahmed” on pages 9-10.)

If the PCs decide to attempt to steal the pendant from the museum, it will be difficult but not impossible. If they succeed, leaving Australia immediately

would be wise. When he finds out, Tanomoshi will cover for them, and they will not run into any legal hassles, but they will receive a stern warning to stick to legal measures in the future. If they fail, of course, they get a firsthand look at Australian justice. Oyama will be able to get them free, but they will have criminal records in Australia from this point on.

The Polygraph Tests

In point of fact, everyone connected with the museum or the exhibit, including Joey Miller and his staff, were given polygraph tests the day after the robbery. Only four people had unusual readings. Three of them had airtight alibis and were not labeled as suspects.

The fourth, Marvin Willoughby, was the security guard assigned to the wing of the museum where the theft took place. He passed the polygraph test all right, but there was an interesting abnormality: When compared with his tests taken four years earlier, a reference wave closely linked to the brain’s alpha waves turned out to be completely different. In the earlier tests it showed normal variation; in the readings taken after the robbery, the wave shows almost no variation at all. It is as if Willoughby’s alpha waves were suppressed somehow. Unfortunately, Willoughby died before it was possible for anyone to follow up on this abnormality. Bellingham can be convinced to give the PCs copies of Willoughby’s polygraph results on an Average test of a PC’s Persuasion skill.

What actually happened to Willoughby, as the referee may have guessed by now, is that Fatima took over his mind, through the agency of the Heart. She forced him to steal the gem, call her followers to come and pick it up, and then kill himself when they came. If the PCs go to Willoughby’s neighborhood and poke around a bit, they will discover that a trio of Arabs was seen entering his apartment building the night of his suicide, but no one remembers seeing them leave. (Fatima transported them away through a proto-dimensional portal.) The police checked into the reports, but have found no solid clues as yet.



WINSTON SMYTHE

Winston Smythe is 53 years old. He is 170 centimeters tall and, while not otherwise fat, has quite a beer belly. His hair is brown but going gray, and he wears a well-tended handlebar moustache. Smythe tends to dress in loud and often clashing colors, and he sports cus-

tom-made, crocodile-skin cowboy boots.

Smythe is the owner of the Smythe Mining Company, headquartered in Sydney, Australia. He doesn't seem to be especially prosperous for someone with such a large business. In part, this is due to the fact that while the company does own several mines, most of them are completely played out, and the yield in the few that still produce is pretty mediocre. Still, Smythe is sure that each day is the one in which he'll strike it rich, and he lives a lifestyle to reflect that attitude. He loves to drink, gamble and womanize. He is loquacious, especially when he has been drinking. He is also cowardly and selfish.

Two years ago, Smythe discovered a strange creature in one of his mine shafts when a pair of mine workers fell through a shallow layer of dirt into a hidden pit and were devoured by the thing. While the creature could not escape from the pit, Smythe soon discovered that it could control his will and force him to serve it. Since then, he has been obeying its commands, and luring people into the pit, so that it might feed. In return, it has haunted his dreams with nightmares of its days hunting aborigines in ages past. It is from those dreams that Smythe learned its name: the Maw.

Occasionally, when Smythe has been unable to entice a human into its lair, he has managed to assuage its blood lust with a sheep or goat, but just barely. Each time, the impulse to throw himself into the pit was very strong. Consequently, Smythe is terrified of the thing, but he is convinced that there is no way for him to escape its influence. So he attracts strangers to the mine—usually with some get-rich-quick scheme—to feed his master.

Experience: Novice

Attributes: 5

Skills: 2; Bargain 5, Business 4, Small Arms (Pistol) 3, Vehicle Use (Wheeled Vehicle) 4, Persuasion 3

Initiative: 1

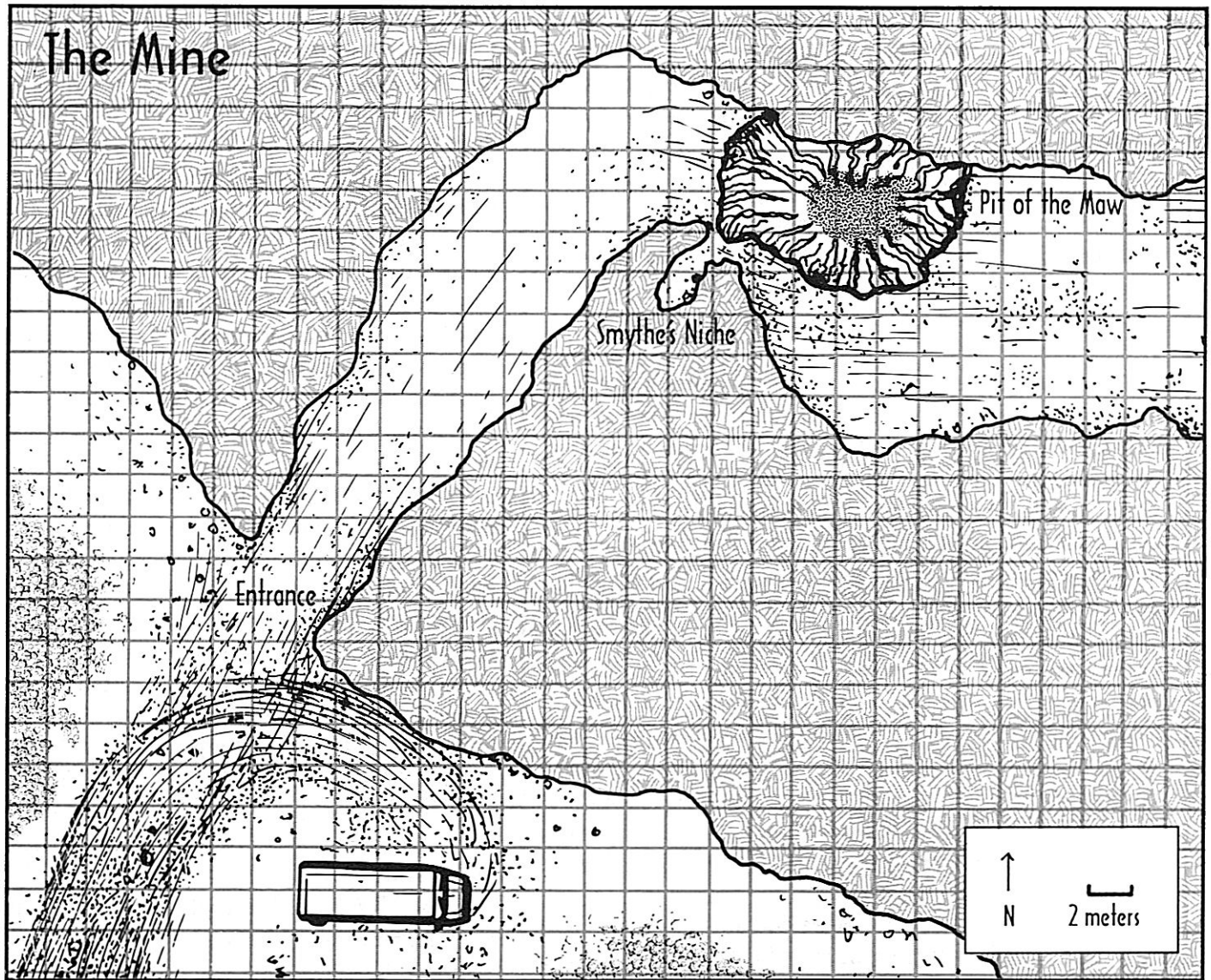
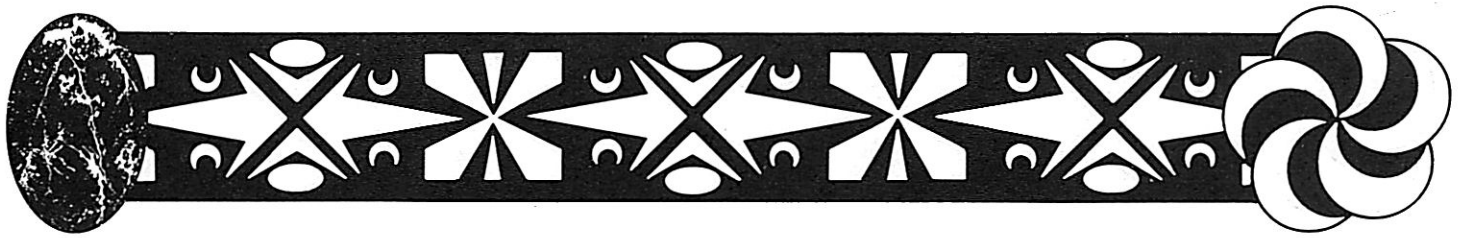
Motivation: *King of Diamonds:* Winston Smythe is greedy and selfish. *King of Spades:* He is also deceitful. Smythe is a compulsive liar and will tell falsehoods even when there is no advantage to be gained.

VISITING WINSTON SMYTHE

The third major NPC that the PCs are likely to want to meet in Sydney is Winston Smythe, owner of a number of gem mines in the region, including opal mines. If the PCs search for information on gemstones, a tip points them toward the Smythe Mining Company, headed by Winston Smythe. Twenty years ago, Smythe Mining was moderately prosperous, but it has definitely fallen on hard times since then. What the PCs do not know, of course, is that one of the mines is the lair for a Dark Minion who has Smythe under its control, and who commands him to lure victims to it so that it can feed.

The encounter with Smythe has several possible outcomes. If the PCs are intelligent and the players are astute, they will realize that Smythe is setting them up. He is, after all, a very transparent man and a lousy actor. The PCs may either ignore his ploys and consider this to be a red herring (it is), or they may decide to fall into the trap to see what Smythe is up to. Of course, it is just possible that they may swallow the bait, hook, line and sinker.

When the PCs contact Smythe, he will wax eloquent about the quality of Australia's opal mines in general and of his in particular. Smythe will enumerate the marvelous stones that his mines have produced, and if the PCs mention the Heart of Darkness to him, he will state quite positively that the stone definitely came from one of his mines. (Of course, this is a bald-faced lie, considering the thousand-year history of the Heart.) In fact, Smythe says he is sure he even knows which mine it came from. After all, he finds "stones the size of golf balls there on a regular basis." If the PCs ask to see this mine, Smythe will agree to show it immediately. If they don't ask, he'll offer. If they decline his offer, he'll act wounded and offended by their disbelief in the magnificence of his mines. If necessary, he'll wheedle and cajole to try to get them to come out and see.



Going to the Mine

If the PCs agree to go to the mine, Smythe packs some supplies into a van and drives them there. The mine is a four-hour drive from the city, in a rather desolate-looking area. If the PCs are perceptive, they will realize that it is rather unusual for the area around a mine to look so deserted, particularly a mine that is supposed to be actively producing valuable gemstones. Not only is there no one in sight, but there is no evidence of a guard station, mining equipment, fences or vehicles, except the one they came in. (The referee will need to be careful

in describing the area, in order to give the players the information they need without blatantly telling them, "It strikes you as odd that the area is so deserted.")

Once the group arrives at the mine itself, Smythe excitedly heads into the mine shaft holding a powerful flashlight. There is further evidence of the mine's disuse here; the support timbers sag dangerously, and it's not entirely clear what's holding them up. Smythe's plan is to try to rush the PCs enough for them to stumble into the Maw's pit before they realize what is happening. For this reason, Smythe will not provide flashlights for the PCs. If they bring their own, he will try to rush the PCs so they'll forget



THE MAW

Strength: 9	Education: 1	Move: 1/5/10/20
Constitution: 11	Charisma: 1	Skill/Dam.: 9/2D6
Agility: 4	Empathy: 11	Hits: 28/55
Intelligence: 1	Initiative: 2	# Appear: 1

Special: The Maw first attacks its prey empathically, using Project Emotion (after establishing empathic contact, of course) to fill its victim with a paralyzing dread. Once the victim is paralyzed, the Maw swallows it whole. Skill and damage statistics are included for when the Maw has to fight off its victim's friends.

The Maw is a creature from another dimension that was transported to ours during a dimensional tremor in prehistory. Its name was given to it by the Australian aborigines when they discovered its voracious hunger and habit of swallowing its victims whole. The creature is barely sentient and not especially intelligent, but it is highly empathic and quite skilled at both Project Emotion and Project Thought. With these abilities, it is able to paralyze or otherwise mentally control its prey.

In appearance, the Maw is bipedal but armless, having instead scores of two-meter-long tentacles surrounding a puckered orifice that can stretch sufficiently to swallow a human being. One red eye bulges outward from either side of its head. The Maw stands roughly three meters tall, and is covered with a leathery skin the color of granite. Its legs are short and stout, and its belly skin hangs down over them. Often, a portion of one of its earlier victims can be seen stretching the belly skin outward.



Ages ago, the Maw wandered Australia freely, adding a dark aspect to the Dream Time legends of many Australian tribes. But eventually, a group of brave warriors were able to lure the thing into a pit and seal it in. It has never been able to escape, but it has been able to maintain a constant source of human servants over the ages, who bring other humans to it so that it can feed. Actually, the Maw rather likes the arrangement. This way, it doesn't have to walk all over to find a meal.

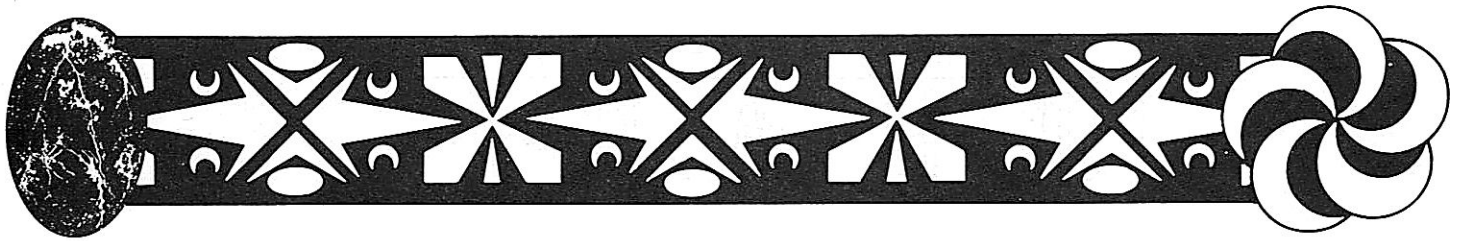
them, bump the PCs so they drop them, "accidentally" step on them, or otherwise try to ensure that his is the only light. He won't engage in this activity very long, though, because he doesn't want to make them too suspicious.

If Smythe is unsuccessful in divesting the PCs of their flashlights, he'll hope his knowledge of the terrain will make him successful at drawing them into his trap. When the PCs follow him, he walks briskly, requiring them to hurry to keep up. If he can't talk the PCs into following him, he tries to force them at gunpoint. If the PCs try to overpower Smythe, he will fire wildly, but he's not really much of a fighter. He usually relies on greed and stupidity to lure his victims here.

If the PCs follow him through the mine, he will suddenly turn a sharp corner and put the light out. If the PCs plunge ahead they will fall into the Maw's pit—the edge is immediately around the corner. Success at a Difficult task versus Observation will reveal the pit before they fall in (success at a second roll will reveal the fact that Smythe is standing on a ledge to the right of the pit, hiding in a niche in the mine wall). If the PCs spot the pit, an Easy roll versus Agility will prevent them from falling in. This becomes an Average test for PCs who who did not actually spot the pit themselves, but were instead warned by their friends.

If the PCs succeed in stopping, they will notice a horrible, fetid stench coming from the pit. It also seems to be quite cold. Smythe may try to push them in if the PCs are close enough. Otherwise, he'll remain quiet, hoping they don't notice him. If they do find him, he'll try to bluff about being confused, then will try to get past them and run away. He won't be very hard to catch and will turn into a blubbing idiot at the slightest threat of violence. He'll claim that the Maw made him do it and that it's not his fault.

If any of the PCs don't succeed in stopping, they plunge five meters into a pit with sheer walls. At the bottom, they will be assailed by a truly overpowering stench and feel a cold, dank breeze. Examining the pit walls reveals that not only are they steep, they are also wet and slimy. It is impossible to climb out



of the pit unless there is someone above with a rope. As the PCs look around, they will also notice a pair of baleful, red eyes glaring at them, moments before the owner of those eyes attacks.

Fighting the Maw

Unfortunately for the PCs, if it comes down to combat with the Maw, things will be more difficult than usual for them. Firearms and explosives are out, as the noise would cause the mine to collapse. (The first time someone fires such a weapon in the mine, tell the PCs that the support timbers begin groaning and dirt and gravel begins filtering down upon them from the ceiling. If they persist in using firearms after that, have the shaft collapse on them, burying them all, then have each PC make an Average test of Luck to worm his or her way out of the rubble. Catastrophic failure means the character is crushed; outstanding success means the character was able to rescue a friend.)

Lasers and bows are safe to use. So are hand weapons, of course. The Maw will target for its

empathic attack the character with the lowest Will-power (use lowest Empathy as a tie-breaker). It will fight the other PCs hand to hand.

If none of the PCs fall into the pit in the first place, they may, of course, opt to exit the mine and use their firearms to cause the Maw to be buried. In this case, Smythe will fall at their feet, grovelling and thanking them for delivering him from the creature's control.

Dealing with Smythe

The PCs may choose to take Smythe back to Sydney and turn him over to the authorities or leave him in the mine and return to Sydney in the van. (Smythe left the keys in the van, so it won't be very hard to steal.) If they take Smythe back to the authorities, they'll be questioned and then released. The police will be pleased, since this seems to solve a number of mysterious disappearances. If they leave Smythe in the mine, the creature will command him to jump into the pit, and after a short but futile struggle of wills, Smythe will obey.



RUMBLE IN RIO



During the bulk of the 20th century, Rio de Janeiro enjoyed a reputation as a fun and exciting vacation spot. Nowadays, life in Rio is still exciting, but it isn't very much fun. Like most Third World countries, Brazil is simply reeling under the strain of poverty. Foreign aid ended years ago, and Brazil doesn't have the economy to support its population.

Although global corporations maintain the airport and several hotels, most of the city is in a rapidly accelerating state of decay. The police make little effort to maintain order—they're mostly concerned with staying alive.

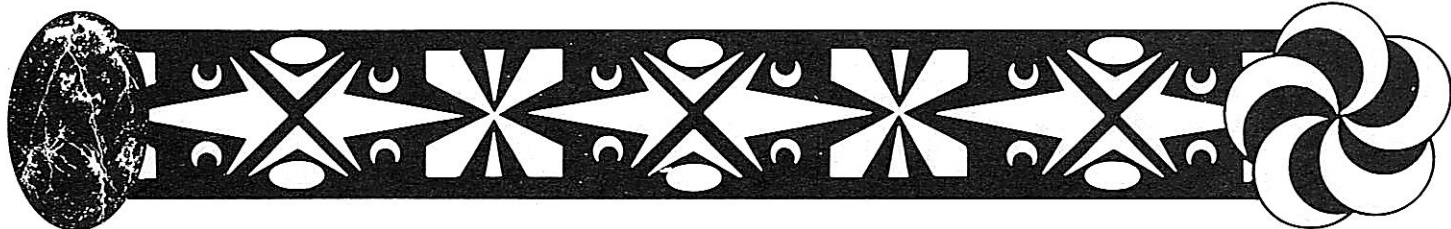
Huge sections of the city are enormous slums. Here, there is no public transportation. The police and fire departments don't enter these sections, and there are no hospitals. Most of the slums have no electricity. There is usually running water, although often it is available only from fire hydrants on the street. The sewer lines haven't been repaired in years and leaks have left standing cesspools in many areas. Gang warfare is a way of life as the poor battle for survival.

There are a very few heavily fortified citadels for the wealthy—usually employees of megacorps with interests in Brazil. Their inhabitants almost never leave their fortresses, and few outsiders are allowed to enter.

As long as they travel by official Oyama transportation, the PCs will have no trouble getting to Rio de Janeiro. They may face just about any sort of random violence when they leave the corporate enclaves, however.

NAZI HUNTERS

When the PCs go to Rio, it will undoubtedly be for one of three reasons: (1) They may be intending to investigate the murder of the policeman who was said to have been looking for a buyer for the Heart of Darkness; (2) They may be looking for Edmund Klaus, the Nazi who was suspected of bringing the Heart to Brazil; or (3) They may simply be following the empathic leading of any pieces of the Amulet of Ahmed that they have gained. If the PCs contact organizations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Insti-



tute (a group dedicated to the hunting of Nazi war criminals), check on Oyamanet, or ask Tanomoshi, they will learn of Sid Goldstein, a local Nazi hunter. Goldstein has spent his adult life trying to track down Nazi war criminals, particularly Edmund Klaus. He has been working in Rio for the last 40 years.

Sid lives in one of Rio's few middle-class areas. Like the more expensive citadels, this is a self-contained community. Most of the residents are Mikes, and they usually leave the community only to complete jobs in the corporate citadels. Sid is one of the few residents who will actually venture into the slum areas. He considers his work more important than his safety. He isn't stupid, though; he always wears a bulletproof vest and carries a pistol (Desert Eagle .357 Magnum).

Sid will be happy to help the PCs if they tell him they are working for Oyama. Some of his funding comes from the Oyama Corporation. He has never seen the Heart of Darkness, but he has carefully studied all of the records surrounding its appearance in Rio.

As Sid explains, Edmund Klaus was a notorious Nazi war criminal who eluded capture and trial. He was known to have spent time in several South American countries. Several people reported seeing him in the spring of 1952 in Rio. He sold several gems, artifacts and art treasures to support himself and to bribe officials to let him remain in their jurisdictions. Many of these items disappeared into private collections. A few were returned to their rightful owners. The most valuable of these items was a black opal he referred to as the Heart of Darkness. Acquaintances of the murdered police officer claim that they saw the stone in the officer's possession in early May of that year. At about the same time, Klaus and the officer were seen eating together in a small cafe. After finishing their meal they were seen walking into a nearby bar. (Sid knows the location of both the bar and the cafe. They are in an area that is now on the edge of one of Rio's worst slums.) Klaus has not been spotted since, and the officer was found dead the following week, mangled as if by a hit-and-run driver.

SID GOLDSTEIN

Although in his mid-nineties, Sid Goldstein is still a power to be reckoned with. Goldstein is tall (190 centimeters) and thin, with a thick, white crew cut. He is cool under fire and is an excellent marksman with a pistol.

Sid's parents were poor residents of a German *shtetl* (Jewish village) in the early 1930s. Unlike many of their countrymen, when they saw Hitler's rise to power, they recognized early what it would mean to them and their people. They sent their children, Moishe ("Sid") and Rebekah, to live with relatives in America. Tragically, they never made it across themselves.

Goldstein believes he was saved from the Holocaust so he could avenge his parents' deaths at the Erichsburg prison camp. He studied history and linguistics in college and went to work for the Simon Wiesenthal Institute (an organization dedicated to finding Nazi war criminals) as a translator and researcher. Edmund Klaus, the Kommandant at Erichsburg, disappeared and was never brought to trial, but research has led Goldstein to believe that Klaus escaped to Brazil with a treasure in gold and gems. As a result, Goldstein worked to become the institute's specialist on Brazil and Portugal.

Even though most experts believe there is no chance that Klaus could have survived so many years (he would be over 100 by now), Goldstein stays on the trail.

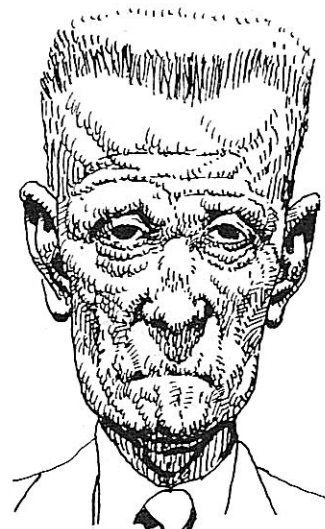
Experience: Veteran

Attributes: 6; INT 8, EMP 3

Skills: 5; Foreboding 3, Interrogation 8, Small Arms (Pistol) 7, Willpower 9, English 8, German 5, Hebrew 4, Portuguese 8, Yiddish 5

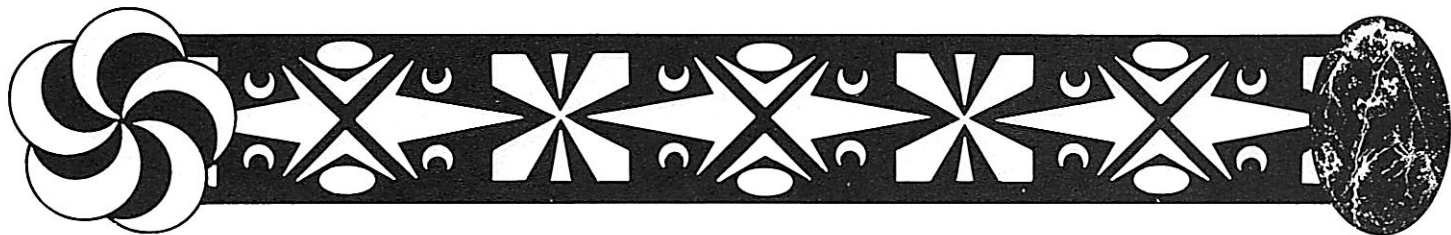
Initiative: 4

Motivation: *Ace of Hearts:* Sid Goldstein believes that all people are responsible for their actions and that those who commit crimes should pay for them. *Queen of Clubs:* He is also very stubborn and quite driven.



JOAO CARLOS' BAR

If the PCs ask, Sid has an inventory of the various jewels recovered or verified as having been in Rio.



EDMUND KLAUS

With his blond hair, blue eyes, and lean, muscled physique, Edmund Klaus looks to be the very personification of Hitler's master race. At a mere 25 years, he was given command of a concentration camp at Erichsburg. Klaus proved to be a cruel, sadistic man who enjoyed his work and reveled in his power over other human beings. As a natural empath, he drew great pleasure from the pain he caused. Following

the war, Klaus disappeared, taking some very valuable gems and artifacts from the Nazi collections with him.

Klaus was discovered in 1952 in Rio de Janeiro by an officer of the city's police force, but he gave the officer the Heart of Darkness as a bribe to let him go free. Over the course of the next few weeks, Klaus and the officer met several times at a bar that has since become the property of Joao Carlos (see "Joao Carlos Martine," on page 29).

During the 1950s, the bar was a contact point for members of the Cult of Fatima, which recognized a kindred spirit in Klaus and inducted him. Klaus helped them retrieve the Heart of Darkness by killing the police officer he'd given it to. He then advanced rapidly in the organization, and within a short time he grew adept at using opals to open dimensional portals. Somewhere he learned a means of slowing his aging. Although Klaus is now a decade over 100 years old, he looks to be a mere 50. Klaus is presently the high priest of the Servants of the Dark Lady.

Experience: Elite

Attributes: 7; EMP 8

Skills: 6; Leadership 8, Willpower Drain 8, Dimension Walk 5, Arabic 8, English 4, German 10, Portuguese 4

Initiative: 5

Motivation: *Ace of Spades:* Klaus is a very charismatic leader.

King of Clubs: He is also a brutal, violent man—a true sadist.

One of them is an unusual antique silver crescent pendant that a local businessman purchased overseas for his wife. The pendant was later reported stolen in a burglary.

If the PCs choose to visit either the cafe or the bar, Sid insists that they go in the daylight and heavily

armed, but he's willing to accompany them. The cafe is now a vacant, dilapidated building. It seems to be used as shelter by vagrants, but otherwise provides no useful information. The bar, on the other hand, actually seems to still be a bar—of sorts. It's very run-down and surrounded by rubbish. When the PCs arrive, there are three men sitting on the curb drinking beer from a random assortment of used bottles. (One is a ketchup bottle; the others appear to be a jelly jar and a mayonnaise jar.) The drinkers seem to be arguing about who has the best knife.

Inside the bar are a couple of old card tables and a weathered picnic table that appears to have been stolen from a park many years ago. The chairs are an assortment of old kitchen chairs. The bar stools are packing crates. There are two men sitting at one table (Thugs 1 and 2) and three at the other (Thugs 3, 4, and 5). One man (Thug 6) is seated at the bar. They all seem to be drinking from the same odd assortment of old bottles as the men outside.

The bartender is a huge man wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out. His bulging arms are covered with tattoos (mostly obscene ones). His black jeans are faded and have obviously been patched many times. He is also wearing several necklaces and chains, including a silver crescent moon set with blue stones. If the PCs have recovered any of the pieces of the Amulet of Ahmed, they will recognize this as another part of it. If not, the most highly empathic character in the group will sense the power of the piece and receive flashes of visions of Fatima and the Heart of Darkness.

If the PCs ask for a drink, the bartender, Joao Carlos Martine, glares at them and asks them what they're doing here. He doesn't want strangers around and isn't even willing to sell them a beer. If none of the PCs speak Portuguese, Sid will interpret. The man will not be favorably impressed when he realizes that they are foreigners. He refuses to answer any questions and orders the group to leave. If they do not obey, knives and handguns will begin appearing in the hands of the men in the bar.

If this scene ends up in combat, the bar's occu-



pants can be run as follows: Thugs 1 and 2 are Novice NPCs and carry S&W 36 pistols. Thugs 3, 4, and 5 are Experienced NPCs who attack barehanded. Thug 6 is a Veteran NPC with an M9 pistol. The three thugs outside the bar are all Experienced NPCs and carry clubs. Stats for Martine are in the sidebar at the right. He has a 311R shotgun loaded with buckshot under the bar.

The only way for the PCs to avoid a fight is to run away—quickly. But the only way for them to get the pendant is to disable or kill the bartender and take it. The men in the bar will fight until their situation seems completely hopeless. In any case, they will not follow the PCs if they leave the bar.

TRAIL TO THE MYSTIC ALTAR

If the PCs recover the pendant, it will suddenly begin exerting a very strong psychic pull on anyone with Empathy within a three-meter radius. If they follow the pull, the PCs will be led through the streets, deeper and deeper into the slum. If they begin following it and then decide to turn back, empathic characters will be unable to do so unless they succeed at a Difficult test of Willpower. Nonempathic characters can carry or drag empathic ones away, but the empathic characters will not be able to travel away from the pull unassisted.

If, on the other hand, the PCs continue to follow the pull, as they near the center of the slum they see a circle of people in black robes with red trim, surrounding an altar in the middle of the street. On the altar is a fist-sized black opal. A group of glassy-eyed locals are entering the circle where a tall man slits their throats with a ceremonial knife, allowing the blood to pour over the black opal on the altar. The bodies are then dragged out of the way and tossed onto a pile. The man wielding the knife is chanting loudly, and the robed figures provide the counterpoint. The people approaching the altar seem to be oblivious to their surroundings. Empathic PCs will try to join the group moving toward the altar unless they succeed at a Difficult test of Willpower.

Suddenly Sid cries out, recognizing the high

JOAO CARLOS MARTINE

Joao Carlos Martine is an enormous man: He is 193 centimeters tall, weighs over 135 kilograms, and is as strong as he looks. Martine is also very heavily tattooed on his arms, legs and torso. He is 36.

Martine is a brewer and takes great pride in his beer. To earn money to continue perfecting his brewing process, Martine opened a small bar in a dilapidated building in his neighborhood. When a local gang lord tried to "absorb" his business, Joao Carlos fought back. He organized a few friends, provided them with weapons, and led them in a brutal execution of the gang lord and his entire family. Joao Carlos let it be known that the same thing would happen to anyone who attempted to challenge his control of a 12-block area of old downtown Rio de Janeiro.

Although not particularly an altruistic man, Martine does provide a significant measure of protection and stability to the residents of his "kingdom." Martine intensely dislikes strangers since they tend to bring trouble.

Martine's wife is a tattoo artist and tries out new designs on Joao Carlos. The silver pendant he wears around his neck (a portion of Ahmed's Amulet) was taken from the corpse of a man he killed for attempting to rape his wife at her studio.

Experience: Veteran

Attributes: 6; STR 8, CON 9

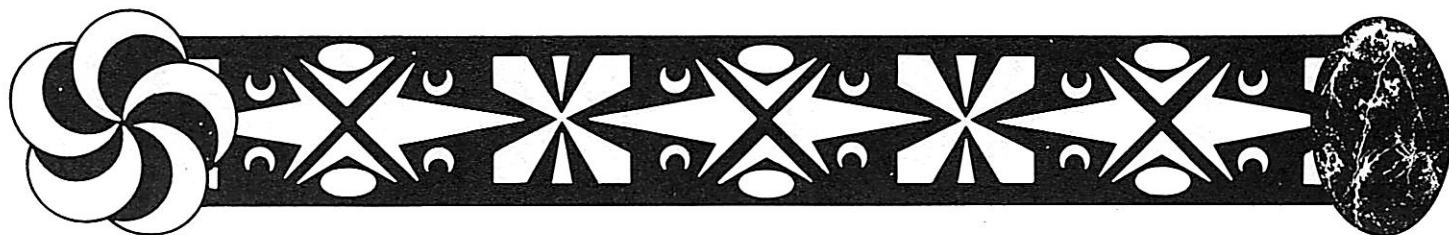
Skills: 5; Leadership 7, Streetwise 7

Initiative: 4

Motivation: *Ace of Spades:* Joao Carlos Martine is very charismatic—a natural leader. *Queen of Clubs:* He is also very stubborn and fond of violence.



priest leading the sacrifice as Edmund Klaus. Sid pulls his pistol and fires at Klaus, missing him but hitting the robed woman next to him. As she falls, the area surrounding the circle begins to glow a sickly green color, and a few seconds later the priests, altar stone and everyone inside the circle disappears. The line of people heading toward the

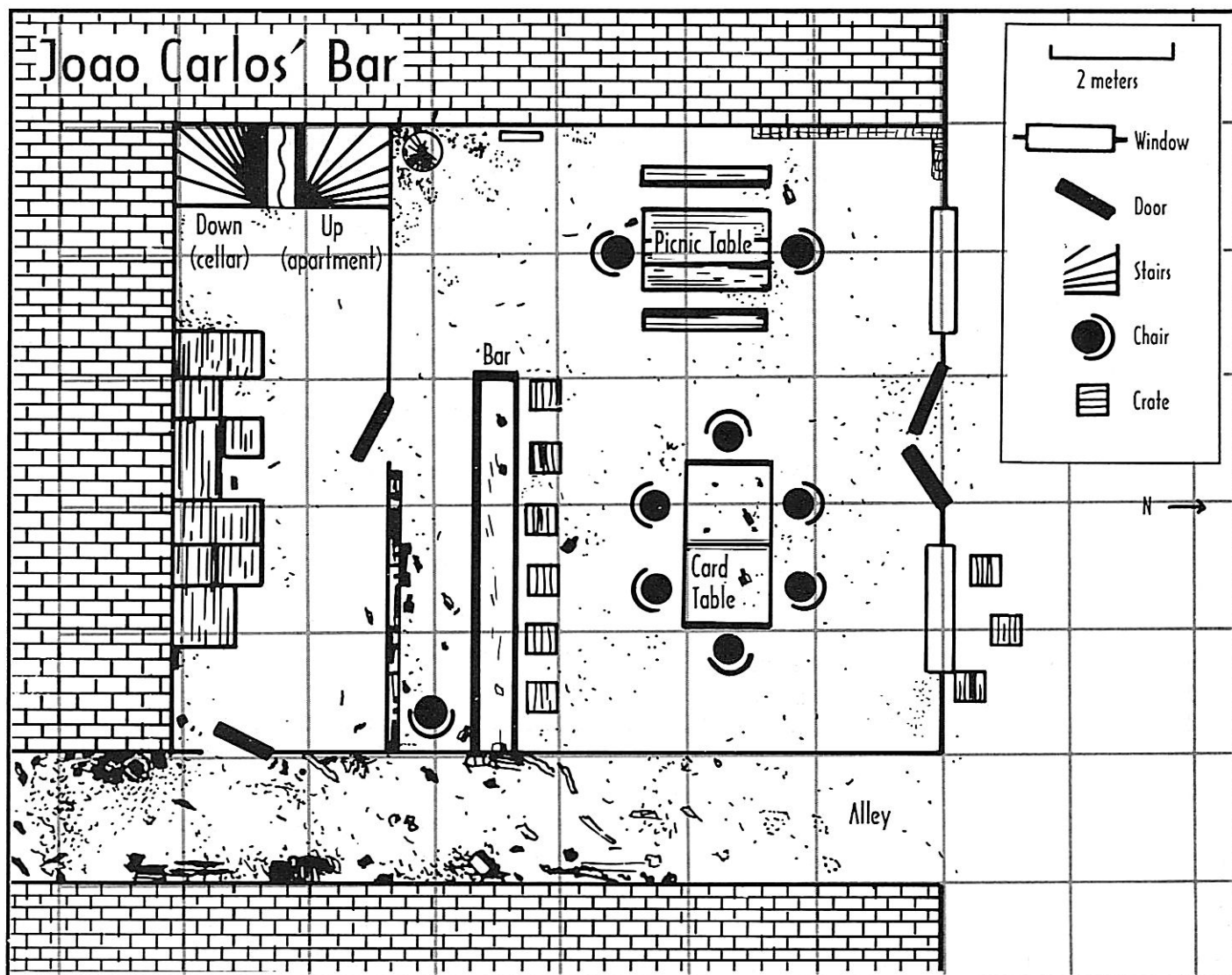


circle shake their heads in bewilderment. The referee should ensure that this all takes place before any of the PCs reach the circle, so that none of them disappear with it.

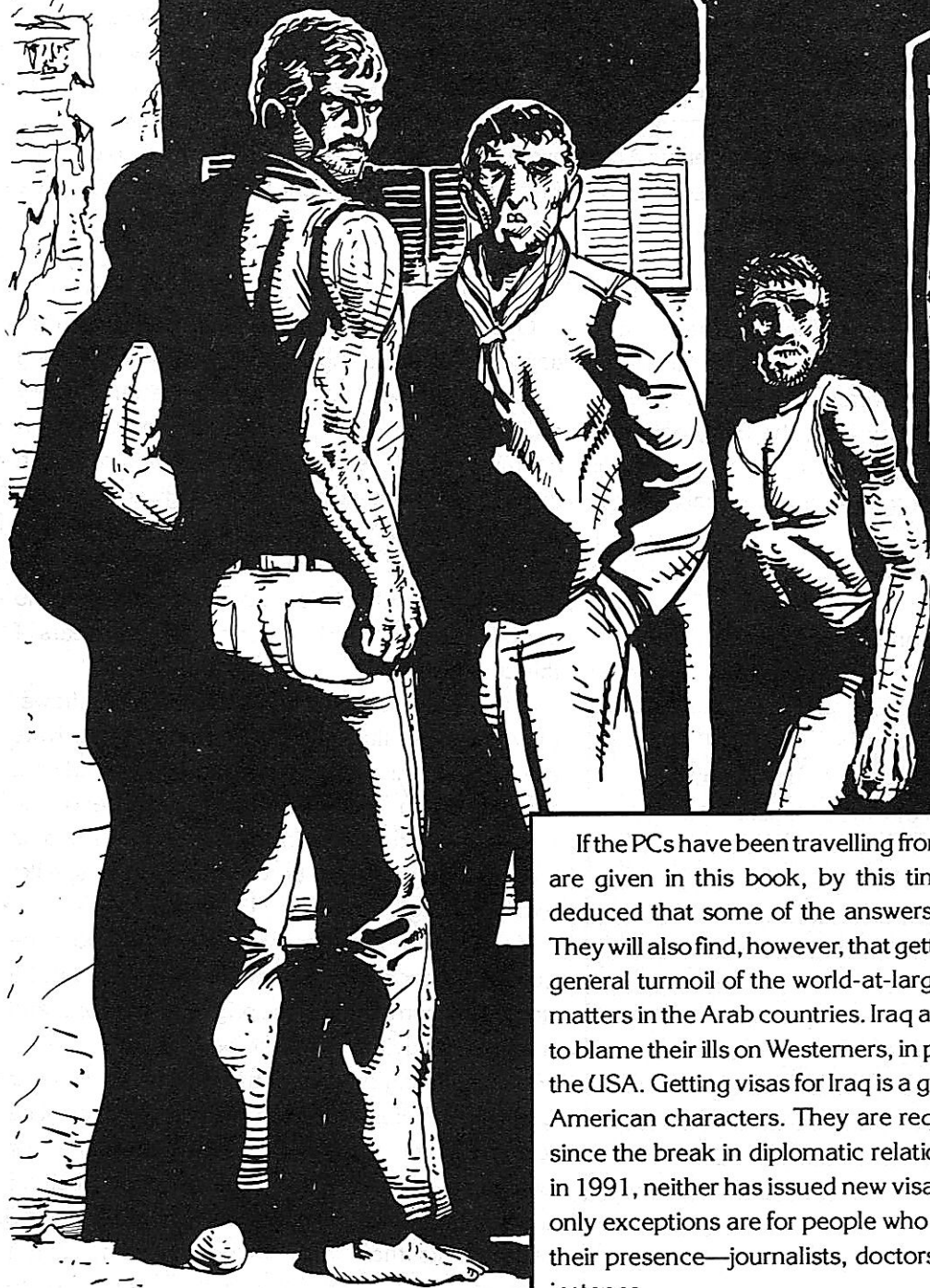
The PCs will easily recognize that the stone they saw on the altar matches the description of the Heart of Darkness. Sid identifies the high priest as Edmund Klaus and points out that, although the man looks no older than 50, he is at least 100 years old. Once the priests and altar have disappeared, Ahmed's Amulet will resume behaving normally, according to the number of pieces the characters have recovered (as described in "The Amulet of Ahmed," pages 9-10).

HANGING ABOUT

The PCs will likely want to continue searching Rio, looking for some other lead to Klaus and the Heart of Darkness, but there is nothing else to be found. If they conduct their investigation from within the Oyama citadel or from Sid Goldstein's home, they will simply find that every clue they turn up leads to a dead end. If they venture into the slums, they may encounter thugs, pickpockets and thieves, but these attacks are not related to the Heart. Eventually it should become clear to them that they will need to pursue clues in one of the other cities where the Heart has made an appearance.



LOOSE TONGUES IN BAGHDAD



If the PCs have been travelling from city to city in the order they are given in this book, by this time, they will probably have deduced that some of the answers they need are in Baghdad. They will also find, however, that getting there is no easy task. The general turmoil of the world-at-large has done nothing to settle matters in the Arab countries. Iraq and Iran in particular continue to blame their ills on Westerners, in particular on the Great Satan, the USA. Getting visas for Iraq is a great problem, particularly for American characters. They are required for entry into Iraq, but since the break in diplomatic relations between Iraq and the US in 1991, neither has issued new visas for the others' citizens. The only exceptions are for people who will serve Iraq's purposes by their presence—journalists, doctors and Red Cross officials, for instance.



Characters who are not American citizens will have less problem obtaining visas—provided, of course, that they can find an Iraqi embassy or consulate. All citizens of Western countries will have some difficulties, however. Neutral countries like Switzerland and Sweden may be the best bets.

If all else fails, the characters can obtain visas at the Iraqi embassy in Amman—if they can convince the officials there that their entry into the country is in Iraq's best interest (an Average task versus Act/Bluff, Bargain, Human Empathy, Luck, Persuasion, or Psychology).

BAGHDAD TODAY

Many believe that, even if Africa was the home of the first humans, Mesopotamia was the cradle of civilization. Certainly several early great empires—the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Babylonians—flourished there. With the rise of Islam, the city of Baghdad became the spiritual and political center of the faithful.

In the 20th century, the rulers of Iraq tried to reestablish the area's ancient glory. They built Baghdad into a splendid, modern city. Their attempts to reestablish political domination weren't

so successful, however, and left large portions of Baghdad in ruins. Even years later, at the time in which the adventurers visit Baghdad, portions of the city are without electricity and water. Evidence of the Coalition bombing raids of 1991 is still visible; there are rubble-filled lots where buildings used to be, and construction is virtually nonexistent.

Because of the war, most foreigners are distrusted in Iraq (Jordanians and Palestinians are the two exceptions, and Soviets are at least tolerated). Anti-American sentiment in particular still runs high.

VISITING KHALID AL-MUFTAWA

Oyamanet (or whatever other source of information the PCs are using) lists as one of the leading authorities on both ancient Middle-Eastern history and ancient artifacts a man named Khalid al-Muftawa, a professor currently on assignment with the Baghdad Museum of Archaeology and Culture. Khalid al-Muftawa is the most logical source of information about both the Heart of Darkness and Nassir ben Yusuf, the fanatic religious leader who once possessed the Heart during the early years of the 20th century.

If the PCs choose to visit Professor al-Muftawa, they will have little difficulty arranging a private meeting with him at his office. Al-Muftawa will not meet them in public, however, because of the trouble it could cause him. Once the office door is closed, though, he will be very friendly. He speaks excellent English with very little accent.

Al-Muftawa does not know anything about the current location of the Heart of Darkness, but he does know something of the origins of the stone, and about the activities of Nassir ben Yusuf.

After relating the tale of the Heart and of Nassir ben Yusuf, Professor al-Muftawa will explain that he knows nothing else about the Heart of Darkness or of Nassir ben Yusuf. He says that the people believe that the evil surrounding the Heart of Darkness is the result of its theft from its rightful owners. The professor will engage in small talk for as long as the PCs wish, but has no more tales to spin.

ANTI-AMERICANISM IN BAGHDAD

While some Iraqis were happy that the expansionist policies of Saddam Hussein were checked, many others saw him as a national hero. They resent the Americans and their Coalition partners for literally pounding Iraq into submission, and they revere Saddam Hussein as a hero for standing up to the rest of the world.

Any characters who let on that they are Americans, Brits, Egyptians, Saudi Arabians or belong to a nation which joined the Coalition must make any rolls on such skills as Act/Bluff, Persuasion, Interrogation, etc. at one greater level of difficulty while they are in Iraq. Anyone who actually flaunts their citizenship must make their rolls at two levels higher, and they also run the risk of attracting the unwelcome attention of certain nationalist groups—groups who think the only good American is a dead American.



The Tale of the Heart

"The Heart of Darkness," al-Muftawa says, "was originally discovered in a mine near An Najat nearly 1200 years ago. Those who discovered the stone claimed that it had been found already cut and polished. While this hardly seemed probable, the story persisted.

"The gem was kept as a talisman of good luck by the owner of the mine where it was found. He felt that the stone's miraculous appearance as a finished gemstone portended great things, and he intended it to be part of the dowry of his only daughter. The man did prosper, and the daughter wed well. Her husband was kind and they soon learned to love each other deeply. She bore him 12 children. The daughters were all beautiful, and the sons were all strong and handsome, and the miraculous opal was included in the oldest daughter's dowry. So the good fortune continued until many generations later when the stone was stolen from the room of an eldest daughter as she was about to give birth to her first child. Both the mother and her infant daughter died before morning. After that day the family was no longer blessed with good fortune. The fates smiled and frowned on them equally as with other men before and since.

"At about this time, a wealthy merchant in An Najat offered great riches for the finest and largest opals. The thieves who stole the stone sold it to the merchant and left with their gold. We do not know what happened to those thieves. Perhaps they left to see the world or were themselves robbed of their newfound wealth. We only know that they were never heard from again in An Najat.

"The wealthy merchant was soon to make a trip to Baghdad. He said the stones were for the caliph and would find a place of honor in that great city. It is known that the merchant went to Baghdad and that he sold many fine gems there. But, alas, the great merchant never enjoyed his wealth. He was mysteriously slain in the very throne room of the caliph of Baghdad, together with the strange young son of an elderly vizier. The vizier's son was taken

KHALID AL-MUFTAWA

Khalid al-Muftawa is a handsome man with Arabic features. He has dark brown hair and eyes and is of moderate height. His hands look delicate but are surprisingly strong; he has a firm, self-assured handshake when he is doing business in the Western fashion. But he is also very correct when observing Eastern manners. Al-Muftawa is a professor of Arabic history who is currently working with the Museum of Archaeology and Culture in Baghdad. He is also an avowed opponent of the current Iraqi government.



The son of a prosperous merchant family, al-Muftawa attended schools in Cairo and Tunis and worked on archaeological digs in Egypt and Jordan before returning to Iraq at the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Originally he had planned to stay out of the country for as long as possible, but he eventually came to the realization that he could do more to help change his country from the inside than he could from without.

Since 1991, al-Muftawa has been part of a special task force dedicated to rebuilding the museum, restoring its exhibits and repairing damaged artifacts from around Iraq. He has a small office in the basement of the museum. His primary task is to help identify artifacts and record their history for the museum exhibits.

Unlike many modern-day Iraqis, al-Muftawa holds no ill will toward Americans or Britons. He sees the 1991 war as the catalyst for many changes in Iraq, and as the instrument by which he was given a chance to assemble his record of his people's history. Still, he prefers not to be seen with anyone known to be an American or Briton—it is politically unwise—though his English is fluent and he is more than happy to talk with Anglophones in private.

Experience: Experienced

Attributes: 5; INT 8, EDU 8, CHR 7

Skills: 4; Computer Operation 7, Arabic 10, English 8, Babylonian 6, Assyrian 5

Initiative: 3

Motivation: *Queen of Hearts:* Al-Muftawa cherishes people, their learning, and their history. *Jack of Hearts:* His astute observation of his fellow humans has made him a very wise person.



away by his father, and the merchant's friends returned him to his homeland for burial.

"Of the great stone, there was no further record. It was not listed among the possessions of the caliph, nor was it with the merchant's belongings.

"Thus, the great, black opal disappeared from the before the eyes of humankind, and because of the sadness in the hearts of the merchant's friends it became known as the Heart of Darkness."

The Tale of Nassir ben Yusuf

"Nassir ben Yusuf was an idealistic man who wished to change the world. He believed that this could only be done by those who had the wit to wield great political power. Nassir served as apprentice to a group of powerful men who used their abilities only for their own gain. They did not seek to change the world unless these changes increased their personal power. But Nassir decided that he would seize the power to make his people strong again. Once more Babylon would be the glory of the world.

"Toward this end, Nassir stole many treasures from the houses of his masters. Among them was the magnificent Heart of Darkness. It was not known how it came from the court of the caliph to the hands of these evil men, but come it did, and Nassir sold it, along with the other treasures, in order to gain the power to make Babylon great.

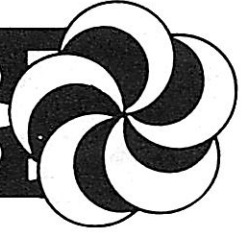
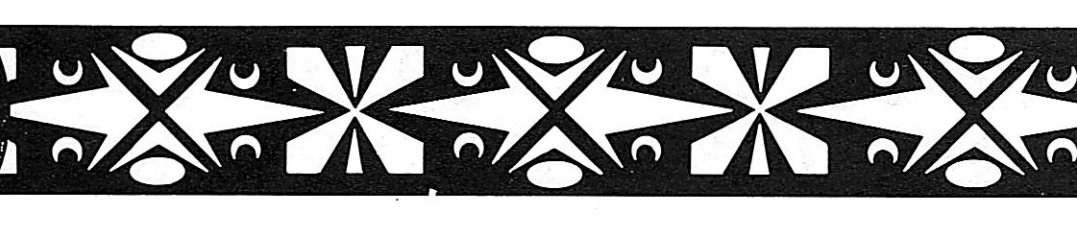
"But he underestimated the wrath of his masters. As he led his people forth to seize their glory, Nassir was felled by the knife of an assassin. Soon his followers were also destroyed, save those who quickly fled into the hills. The body of Nassir ben Yusuf was found beneath a great tree with his tongue cut out and a warning to 'Beware the Heart of Darkness' carved into his chest by the assassin's blade.

"Never again has the Heart of Darkness been seen in Baghdad."

A BRUTAL SENTENCE

At some point during their investigations in





Baghdad, the PCs should have the following encounter:

As they are walking down the street, they hear a brief scream, followed by a liquid gurgle, about one block ahead. If they rush to investigate, they discover a young man lying on the sidewalk, a pool of blood flowing from his mouth. Several other men can be seen disappearing down the alley, but they have too much of a head start for the PCs to catch up with them before they disperse into alleys and doorways.

The man on the sidewalk is still breathing—with difficulty—but he is in shock and his hands are broken. Administering first aid requires an Easy roll against Medical skill to recognize that the victim needs to have his airway cleared. When a character opens the victim's mouth, they find that his tongue has been torn out. If the party gets the man skilled medical attention within half an hour of discovering him, he will live; he has lost a lot of blood, but no vital organs have been damaged. The man is wearing an unusual moon-shaped pendant; it is one-fifth of the amulet created by Ahmed to locate Fatima. If the PCs have already encountered the amulet, they will recognize it immediately.

There is a hospital a short distance away; the characters passed it on the way here. If they either take the wounded man to the hospital or contact paramedics, the staff will try to detain them to be questioned by the police. However, since these people are overworked and understaffed, escape from them would be fairly easy.

If the PCs remain, the police suspect them of being involved with the crime and question them about it. If the PCs are very polite, the police will ask their questions and then let them go. However, if the PCs become belligerent or disrespectful, they will be hauled to police headquarters. The Iraqi police are not very fond of foreigners, but have been instructed not to create any international incidents. This will not stop them if the PCs make them angry, but it will keep them calm if they are not provoked.

Eventually, the PCs will be questioned personally by Muhammad al-Sabaa, the Baghdad chief of

MUHAMMAD AL-SABAA

Muhammad al-Sabaa is 178 centimeters tall and of average build. He has dark hair and eyes, and classical Arabic features. Al-Sabaa was very athletic in his youth, but has put on several extra pounds along the path to middle age. He is by no means fat, though—just past his prime. Al-Sabaa is 48 years old and is graying at the temples. His moustache is also peppered with gray.



Al-Sabaa is the chief of police in Baghdad, and his is a very difficult job in these troubled times. There have always been poverty and unrest in his city, but ever since the war of '91, these situations have become increasingly worse.

Al-Sabaa genuinely wants to help people; he is deeply religious and tries very hard to enforce the laws which he feels are just and beneficial, but often looks the other way if repressive and vindictive laws are disobeyed. He has tried to change the worst of the brutal methods of his predecessor. As for accepting bribes, note that bribery isn't really perceived of as wrong by the underpaid and overworked chief of police—that's just how things are done in Baghdad.

Experience: Veteran

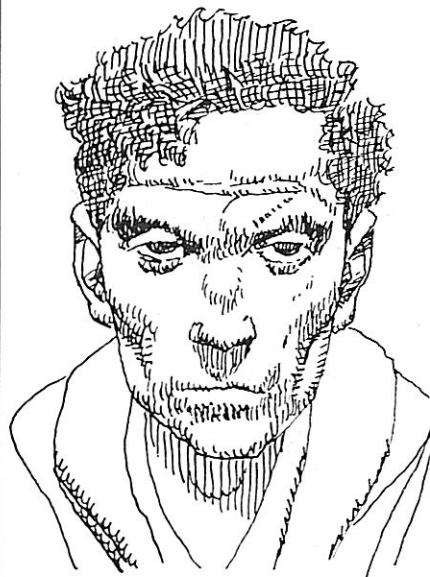
Attributes: 6; STR 8, INT 7

Skills: 5; Interrogation 7, Leadership 7, Arabic 10, English 4

Initiative: 4

Motivation: *King of Hearts:* Muhammad al-Sabaa is an honorable man. He will always deal with others very fairly within his own sense of honor. He doesn't think all laws are right, but will strive very hard to enforce those he believes in. *Five of Diamonds:* He is also slightly greedy; he likes having the good things in life, but he will not sell his honor for them.

police (see the sidebar, above). A bribe of at least \$2000 will bring not only kind treatment from al-Sabaa, but answers to some of the PCs' questions as well. He can tell them that there have been several



DAVID PETERSON

David Peterson is 32 years old. He is 188 centimeters tall with a muscular build, and he has dark brown eyes and black hair. Peterson is not strikingly handsome, but his athletic build and craggy features are pleasant to look at.

Peterson is the son of proles, but was educated by the Oyama Corporation. When the Brothers of Ahmed discovered that he was highly empathic, he was brought into the group and

trained in the use of these abilities.

When a group of Servants of the Dark Lady was discovered in Baghdad, Peterson was selected to go undercover in an attempt to locate the Heart of Darkness. It was thought that his empathic skills would help him elude detection. He also is fluent in Arabic and his features would help him blend into his surroundings. After a while under tanning lights, he was dark enough to pass as an Iraqi.

Peterson is a good agent. His empathic skills did help him to avoid detection for several months—but in contacting Oyama about the pendant, he gave himself away.

Experience: Veteran

Attributes: 6; AGL 8, INT 7, EMP 7

Skills: 5; Act/Bluff 7, Disguise 6, Human Empathy 6, Arabic 9, Observation 7, Project Emotion 6, Project Thought 6, Stealth 7, Streetwise 7, Willpower 7.

Initiative: 4

Motivation: *Ace of Hearts:* Peterson has a very strong sense of justice. He seeks to right wrongs and punish those who hurt others. *King of Hearts:* Peterson is also a very honorable man. He will lie in his job as a spy, but only to the enemy. He deals very fairly with everyone else. Even in his dealings with the enemy, he is never unnecessarily cruel.

bodies had any identification, and none has been identified at this time. The man the PCs discovered is the first one that has been found alive. Al-Sabaa knows nothing about the Heart of Darkness.

Questioning the Victim

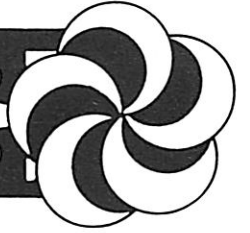
If the police have been suitably bribed, they will be willing to allow the PCs to attempt to question the wounded man. If they haven't been bribed, they will tell the PCs that they will handle the case from now on and refuse to let the PCs see him. If the characters attempt to question the wounded man, they will find it quite difficult. He can no longer speak, and since his hands were broken, he can't write, either. Make the players roleplay the questioning. Only give them the answers they seek if they ask the right questions and if they figure out how to communicate with the man effectively—perhaps a form of "20 Questions" where he either nods or shakes his head in response to questions. If they are questioning the man immediately following his medical care, they will also find that he is groggy from the pain medication he has been given.

If the PCs prove to the man that they are employees of the Oyama Corporation, he will become very cooperative and give them as much of the information below as is possible. If the PCs are *not* working with Oyama, a Difficult roll versus Act/Bluff, Interrogation, Persuasion or Psychology will convince him to share some of his knowledge. Of course, some Empathy skills might be useful as well. In any case, the referee should decide how much information the PCs gain, based upon their skills, their attitude toward Peterson, their reputations, and the like, as well as how they go about questioning a man with broken hands and no tongue.

What Peterson Has to "Say"

The wounded man reveals that his name is David Peterson, and that he is an employee of the Oyama Corporation. He was trying to infiltrate the Servants of the Dark Lady and was found out. When the PCs happened upon him, he was being given the treatment usually afforded those who the Servants think

cases of bodies discovered with the tongues ripped out. Some of the victims appeared to be foreigners—probably European or American. None of their



have talked too much—his tongue was ripped from this throat and he was left for dead. Several of the other men who had earlier been found with their tongues cut out were also employees of the Oyama Corporation; others were members of the cult itself who had made one mistake too many.

Peterson had been successful in spying on the cultists for several months when he located his portion of the Amulet of Ahmed in a Baghdad bazaar. His Empathy allowed him to see the vision described in the section on Sydney (page 21, under the Gems and Minerals Room), and he realized that the pendant had some connection with the Heart of Darkness. Consequently, he decided to try to get the

pendant to Tanomoshi, but in his haste he was careless and betrayed himself to the Servants. The Servants did not realize that the pendant had any importance and did not remove it from Peterson's neck. In fact, they were so angry with him that they didn't even take him back to their hideout—opting instead to execute him on the spot. Peterson does not know where the Heart of Darkness is.

If the PCs inform Tanomoshi of Peterson's situation, Peterson will be spirited out of Baghdad and returned to the US the following day. On the other hand, if Peterson is still in Baghdad the following evening, the Servants return and complete the execution.

NIGHTMARES IN NIGERIA

Getting to Isa, Nigeria, requires chartering a small plane, since commercial aircraft no longer land there. Getting a charter will require 10 days, minus one day for each point of Bargain skill of the PC making the deal. It is also possible to get there overland by flying to Kano and then driving to Isa, but the roads are poor and fuel is hard to find. The PCs will find it necessary to hire a guide and take extra fuel if they attempt the overland route. They will actually arrive more quickly if they wait a few days for a charter to become available. If the PCs are working with Oyama, the company will authorize the expense for the charter if it is asked, of course.

Oyamanet (or whatever source of information the PCs are using) lists Heather Mackenzie as the foremost expert on the history of Nigeria's aboriginal peoples. There was indeed a small tribe near what is now Isa, Nigeria, that was decimated by slavers in the mid-1800s. The history of this and several other minor Nigerian tribes is recorded in the book, *Tribes and Cultures of Aboriginal Nigerian Peoples* by Heather Mackenzie. Ms. Mackenzie lives

in Isa and teaches at the Institute for Cultural Preservation.

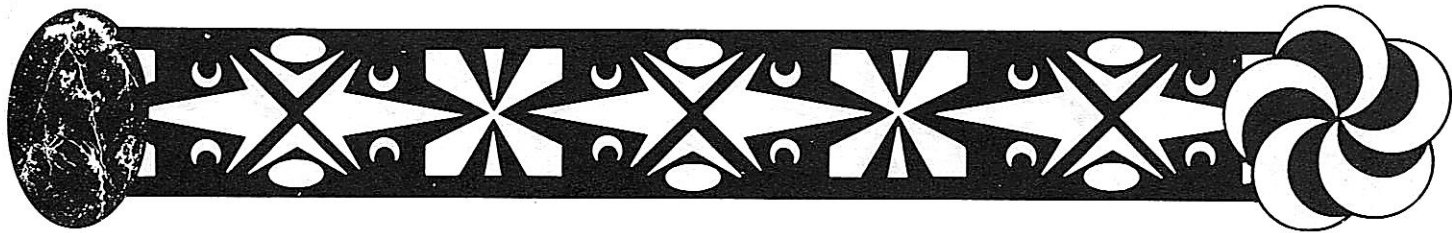
VISITING HEATHER MACKENZIE

Heather Mackenzie is pleased to welcome visitors. If the PCs are working with the Oyama Corporation, Mackenzie reveals that she is also very familiar with that organization; in fact, they awarded her the grant that is allowing her to continue her work. (Mackenzie does not know that the corp is actually a front operation for the Brothers of Ahmed, however. Nor is she even aware of the Brothers' existence, for that matter.)

Mackenzie also knows the story of the tribal queen taken by slavers in the 19th century, including the fact that the queen owned a huge, black opal with red veinings. According to Mackenzie, the tribe ranged near the Isa region. At its peak, it numbered fewer than 3000 individuals. It was traditionally led by a matriarchal warrior; most often the leaders came from a clan composed of women who were either widows or who had chosen not to marry. Originally, they banded together for mutual support at a time when the lack of a hunter to provide for the family meant near-certain death. The women helped each other to rear their children, while also providing food and protection for the entire group. They came to be known as fearless hunters and warriors. Although a fiercely independent clan, the women remained loyal to the tribe as a whole, despite the fact that they believed their lifestyle made them stronger than more traditional family groups. Certainly, the children of this matriarchy within a matriarchy exhibited a flair for leadership.

Eventually, this group which began as outcasts struggling for survival became the most powerful and respected clan in the tribe. The clan's women were seldom married, although they often bore children. As well, the clan assumed responsibility for any orphans from the tribe, or children captured





in battle.

Under the pressures of increasing population, the last of the tribal queens began leading raids on other tribes, thereby expanding the tribe's territory to help feed its members and to augment its wealth. The Heart of Darkness was captured in such a raid, and the queen took a fancy to the stone and appropriated it for herself. She was wearing it when she and her hunting party were captured by slavers in 1833.

Nothing is known of the queen's final destination or fate, but her tribe suffered mightily. While still reeling from the loss of its queen, the tribe was repeatedly raided by slavers, and it soon ceased to exist as an independent group. No known members of the tribe remain today.

Mackenzie doesn't know anything about the current location of the Heart of Darkness. If the PCs inquire about Ahmed's Amulet, she does not recognize it. She tells the PCs, however, that if anyone in Isa can help them, it will be M'Bala Keyet, a native of the region who is both a highly skilled surgeon running the local clinic, and a practicing witch doctor. M'Bala is feared and respected by the locals, if the PCs make friends with him, he will be able to ask questions of the locals. He also knows more about the darker aspects of the native cultures than Mackenzie does.

VISITING KEYET'S CLINIC

Keyet's clinic is a cement-block building with a corrugated tin roof and a single, open room inside. It measures approximately 10 meters by 20 meters, with a receptionist's desk and file cabinets just inside the door, a bench along the wall next to the desk (for patients to wait on), and the rest of the interior curtained off into individual "rooms."

When the PCs meet Dr. Keyet, they find that he speaks excellent English, but he strikes them as an abrupt, abrasive, almost overpowering personality. He is dressed in patched surgical pants and shirt, with a white lab coat thrown over the top, but also wears a feathered headdress and several beaded necklaces. When the PCs first enter the clinic, he listens to their names, nods brusquely, then points

HEATHER MACKENZIE

Heather Mackenzie is 152 centimeters tall, weighs 59 kilograms, and has dark auburn hair and brown eyes. While not exactly fashion-model beautiful, but she is very pretty in an earthy, healthy way. She's what used to be known as a handsome woman. Mackenzie is en-

ergetic and moves quickly. She's bubbly and happy most of the time, but becomes very solemn and serious when dealing with the horror and injustices that abound in her world.

Mackenzie's parents were sociologists who came to Nigeria to study its African cultures, then fell in love with the country and never left. Heather was born in Nigeria, and although she has traveled extensively and attended college in England, she considers Africa to be her home.

Although a scholar by inclination, Mackenzie earns her living as a writer: She writes scholarly studies under her own name and mystery novels as Amanda Scott. Mackenzie is careful to keep the two careers separate, since she is afraid that she won't be taken seriously as a scholar if she is known as a writer of popular fiction.

Mackenzie is also active in volunteer work in Isa. She works at a free clinic and is a qualified nutritionist and an acknowledged authority on nutritional deficiency illnesses.

This young woman has recorded everything she can find out from oral legends and history, in order to preserve the records of Nigeria's aboriginal people. She has a large collection of artifacts and a library of books on the subject. She has also conducted extensive research in African folk medicine, the evolution of oral folklore, primitive religions and the belief in magic among nonindustrialized peoples.

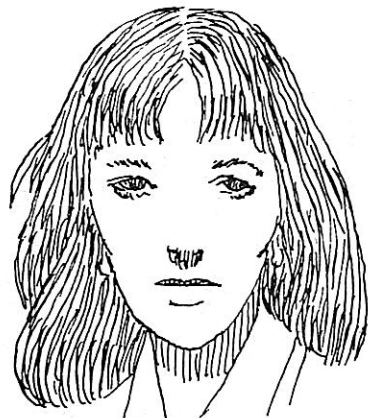
Experience: Novice

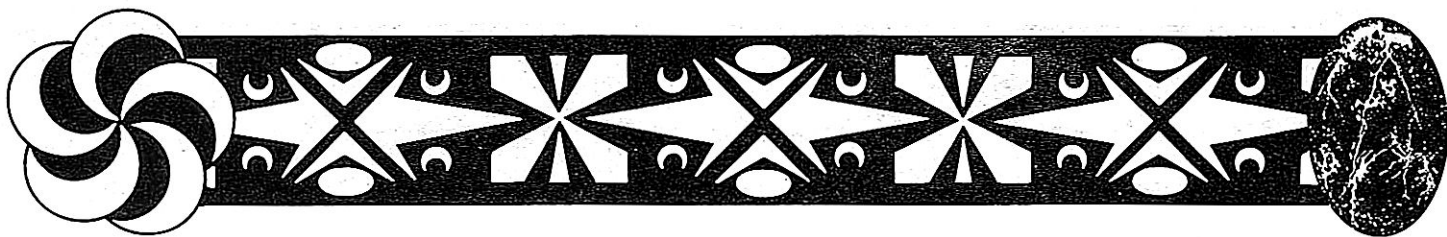
Attributes: 5; INT 8, EDU 8

Skills: 2; Biology 8, Chemistry 4, English 10, Nigerian 10, Psychology 7, Willpower 8

Initiative: 2

Motivation: *King of Hearts:* Heather Mackenzie is a very honorable person and tries to deal fairly with everyone. *Queen of Hearts:* She is also loving and thoughtful. Mackenzie genuinely likes people and enjoys helping them.





M'BALA KEYET

M'Bala Keyet is 195 centimeters tall and so thin as to seem almost a stick figure. He has an extremely dark complexion, thick black hair and dark brown eyes. Keyet is physically much stronger than he appears, and he is capable of working very long hours with little sleep.

Keyet studied at the University of Texas Medical School and is a licensed surgeon. He is also a tribal shaman or witch doctor. Keyet sees no conflict between the two, and he has found that he can heal some illnesses as a witch doctor that have no known cure in modern medicine.

He also relies on ancient rituals to make his patients comfortable while modern medicines and treatments are curing their illnesses. Although Dr. Keyet could make much more money caring for the wealthy, he prefers to work long, hard hours in his clinic, struggling to make life more bearable for the poor. Many of his patients are unable to pay him anything at all and others can only pay by barter, but Dr. Keyet treats all of his patients with the same care and love. He has never been known to turn anyone away.

While these actions betray a warm and caring heart, in person Keyet is a striking, sometimes frightening, figure. Typically, he wears regalia more befitting the image of a witch doctor than a surgeon, and he frequently chastises his patients for their lack of obedience to his orders, shouting at them in a deep, rumbling voice that can be heard yards beyond the walls of the clinic. When he is listening to someone else (which is rarely), he fixes them with a baleful stare, as if daring them to speak.

Heather Mackenzie has great admiration for Keyet, and she does volunteer work at his clinic. The two could be considered friends, but even Mackenzie describes Keyet as "spooky."

Experience: Experienced

Attributes: 5; INT 9, EDU 8, EMP 4

Skills: 4; Empathic Healing 3, Human Empathy 4, Nigerian 10, English 9, Medical 9, Psychology 5, Willpower 6

Initiative: 3

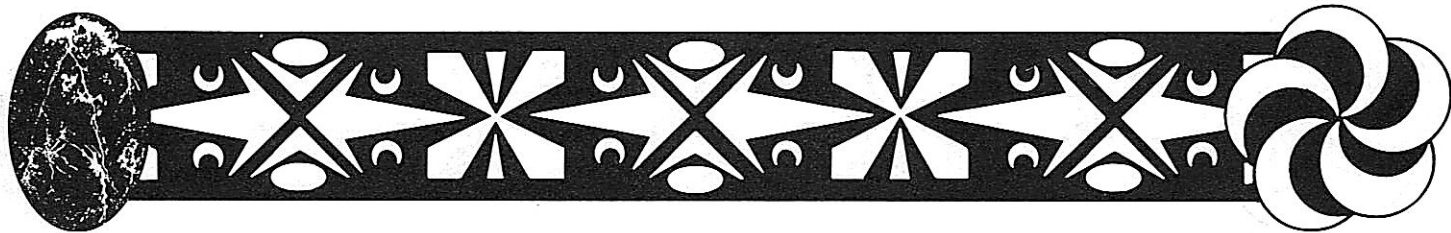
Motivation: *Queen of Hearts*: M'Bala Keyet cares deeply about his patients, and he works very hard to make their lot easier, physically. *Jack of Spades*: He is also an arrogant, brash individual who takes a patronizing pride in the fearful awe he inspires.

to a group of patients sitting on the single bench in his waiting room and shouts something in Nigerian ("Get off the bench and let the strangers sit down!"). Immediately, the patients jump from the bench and take seats on the floor. Keyet then turns and stalks away toward one of the curtained alcoves, growling over his shoulder in English, "I'll be back in a moment." If any of the PCs follow him, he just glares at them. If they try to talk to him while he works, he snaps, "Will you shut up until I'm finished?" In all, the PCs will have to wait about 45 minutes for him to return to them. Note that if they decide to leave and come back later, when Keyet is not so busy, they will find that he is always so busy.

When he does finally sit down to talk with the PCs, they discover that Dr. Keyet knows nothing about the Heart of Darkness except for the brief mention of it in Mackenzie's book on Nigerian tribes. He has heard of no mention of the stone from any of his patients, but he becomes very thoughtful if Ahmed's Amulet is described or if the PCs show him one of the pendants. After a few minutes of glaring at the floor while tapping his temple with a forefinger, he remembers hearing of a similar pendant from one of his patients.

Keyet has become very concerned lately with what seems to be an unusual parasitic infestation. Several people have been brought to him by family members because they were behaving strangely. In each case, the patients have assured him that they are feeling fine, and a cursory medical examination indicated that they were perfectly healthy—too healthy, in fact, for their environment and diet. But each has refused to undergo any extensive testing, and lately, several of them have disappeared.

One frightened relative came to Keyet after he saw his cousin entering and leaving a stretch of Demonground. The cousin ignored the watcher, and seemed intent on some inexplicable activity. Eventually, it became evident to the watcher that many other people were entering and leaving the area. Keyet says that the relative was wearing a pendant that looked very much like the one the PCs describe or show him.



Keyet hasn't seen the fellow since, but he knows where he lives and can take the PCs there.

VISITING THE MAN WITH THE PENDANT

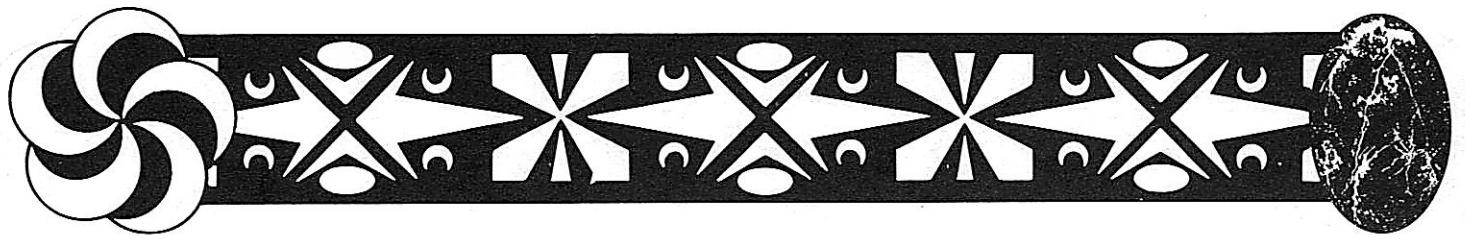
When Dr. Keyet takes the PCs to visit his patient, they discover that the man lives in a small house near the southern edge of town. Barely 100 meters away, the town ends in a dense wall of jungle, composed of rotting trees draped with thorny vines and pale, fleshy creepers. Here and there along the jungle's edge, ragged openings can be seen where dead trees have fallen, tearing through the webwork of vines. Through these holes, glimpses of decaying houses can be viewed, and Keyet comments that the town once reached several more blocks to the south, but that the jungle has been spreading. "It is Demonground," he explains. "No one goes there any more." He does not comment on the fact that some of his own patients recently have gone there.

The house the PCs have come to visit is small, but

it has been relatively well cared for. Dr. Keyet knocks on the door several times and then shouts angrily in Nigerian. Immediately, a man opens the door a crack and then, recognizing Dr. Keyet and Ms. Mackenzie (if she has come along), throws the door open to let them in. He glances with frightened eyes at the PCs but doesn't prevent them from entering. Once they are inside, he shuts the door and bars it.

Keyet introduces him to the PCs as Mr. M'batu. M'batu does not speak English, so he cannot answer the PCs' questions directly, but either Keyet or Mackenzie can translate. The PCs will notice immediately that M'batu is indeed wearing a pendant made from Ahmed's Amulet. M'batu isn't willing to sell the pendant, but he says he will give it to the PCs in return for their help in finding out what is happening to his people. In addition to his cousin, his wife and three brothers are now missing. M'batu is terribly frightened.

Keyet and Mackenzie will refuse to let the PCs simply take the pendant. They do agree to help the PCs solve the mystery.



SKULLWORM DEMONGROUND

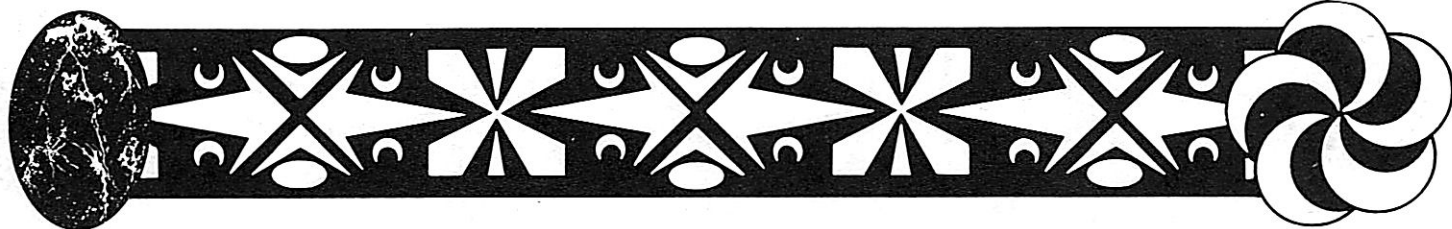
Demonground is a place to be avoided if at all possible. Some pieces of Demonground are ravaged, barren stretches of land; others are tangled regions of riotous alien growth; but all are haunted by Dark Minions of one sort or another and abandoned entirely by humanity. The area of Demonground on the southern edge of Isa is actually relatively small, barely a few miles across, but it is particularly nasty. It is centered on a dimensional doorway opened by Fatima 1000 years ago, closed shortly thereafter by the Brothers of Ahmed, and reopened just a few months ago by the Servants of the Dark Lady. The doorway leads to the realm of the Dark Minion race known to the Cult of Fatima as the skullworms.

In the skullworms' realm, the parasite is king. A relatively few sturdy, nonparasitic life forms serve as the basis of the food chain, and nearly everything else survives by preying parasitically on those life forms, or upon another type of parasite. The skullworms themselves are intelligent, empathic parasites that dwell within the brains of other crea-

tures, preferring to infest a very human-looking primate native to their realm. But over the course of millennia, the number of skullworms came to exceed the number of primates, and soon the skullworms spread to every possible creature with a central nervous system. After that, a rigid cultural system evolved in which each individual skullworm was judged by the quality of creature it occupied.

Then, not quite 1000 years ago, Fatima discovered the realm of the skullworms and bargained with them for training in dangerous empathic powers. In exchange for their teaching, she agreed to open a dimensional portal and send them human bodies to inhabit. Several of her earliest enemies disappeared in this manner. Then, when the vizier Ahmed Mustafa dealt Fatima her first major defeat and imprisoned her mind in a proto-dimensional cell, his friends also found the African doorway to the skullworms' dimension and closed it. Now, as Fatima is on the verge of escaping her prison, her servants have reopened the dimensional portal, and this time various parasites from the skullworms' realm have come spilling out to create a terrible, and growing, circle of Demonground.

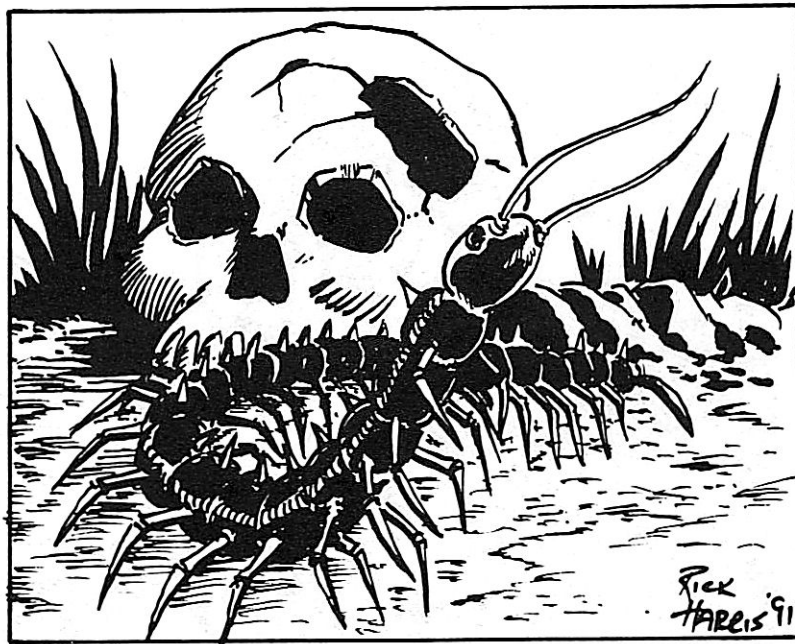




THE SKULLWORM LIFE CYCLE

Skullworms go through three stages in their growth from larvae to adult. In its newly hatched stage, the worm resembles a tiny leech, about one centimeter long, three millimeters thick, and shiny black. In this form, it burrows into the skull of its intended host and settles itself in the center of the creature's brain. Once there, the worm begins its transformation to the sedentary second-stage form, in which it extrudes thousands of fine tendrils into the surrounding brain tissue, by means of which it takes control of its host. The worm remains in this stage for five to seven years. Eventually, as it nears time for the worm to breed, it enters its last stage. In this stage, the tendrils shorten and thicken, converting into legs, and the worm begins to develop an exoskeleton to help protect it once it has left the host. At this point, it begins to resemble an immense centipede (up to 30 centimeters long and five centimeters thick). Once the transformation is complete, the adult skullworm burrows its way back out of the host brain, killing its host in the process. Then it proceeds to mate (bisexually) and lay from two to three eggs. Typically, the adult places these eggs in a protected location near a source of new hosts (near the host's food supply, for instance). As each egg hatches, the newborn skullworm begins its quest for a host. If the parent chose a very good location for the eggs, the larva may have to do no more than wait for a host to come to it. If the location chosen was poor, however, the larva may have to undergo a laborious trek to find a host.

It is during the sedentary second stage that the skullworms are sapient and empathic creatures. But it is important to note that the hosts remain alive and conscious as well, simply with decreasing control over their own bodies. And while the hosts do not perceive the worm itself (they simply know that something is taking control of their bodies), the skullworm *does* perceive the mental activity of its host, including thoughts and memories. With access to this knowledge, skullworms come to mimic their hosts' normal behavior reasonably well. The



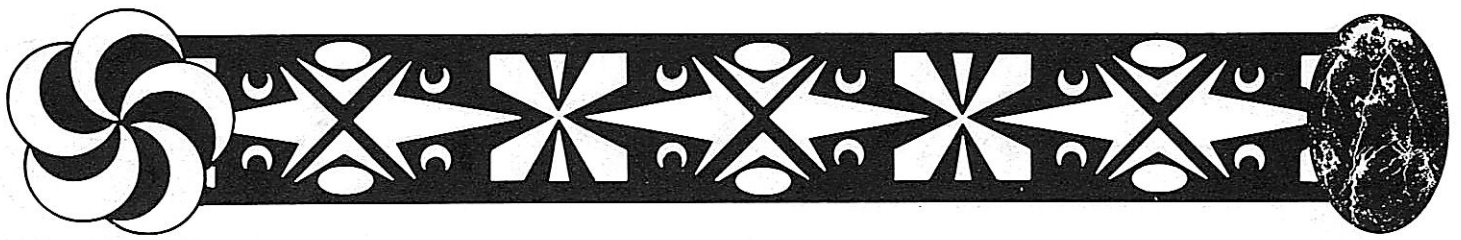
major flaw in their manipulation, however, is that they are unable to reproduce emotions. Thus, controlled hosts may say normal and believable things, but they generally do so in a very wooden, emotionless fashion.

Oddly enough, however, the skullworms can appear to have a temporary therapeutic effect on people. After the worm implants itself in a living organism, after a brief period of intense pain as it establishes itself, the leech begins to secrete a fluid into the host's bloodstream. This fluid puts a host into a slightly euphoric state. The host no longer feels pain, and physical damage heals roughly three times as quickly as normal.

SCOUTING THE DEMONGROUND

If the PCs choose to watch for humans entering or leaving the Demonground, they will be successful almost immediately. There is a large community of skullworms in the Demonground, and skullworms leave frequently in order for their human hosts to eat, and in order to practice interacting with the outside world. As a result, the skullworms are learning to use many human devices to improve their chance of survival and quality of life.

If the PCs attempt to follow one of these people as he or she leaves the Demonground, it will be quite



easy. The subject's activities are not very revealing, however. Generally, he or she simply picks up some groceries, completes a few very ordinary errands and returns to the Demonground.

It will be possible to kidnap such a person if the PCs do so completely away from the Demonground. There is a 75% chance that the person followed is known by Keyet or Mackenzie. In such cases, the subjects readily recognize the doctor and Mackenzie, too, and they act quite normal, responding appropriately to questions and the like. The only evidence of strangeness is that they seem lacking any enthusiasm. Questions like, "What are you doing?" will be answered in a toneless voice with replies like, "I'm doing the shopping."

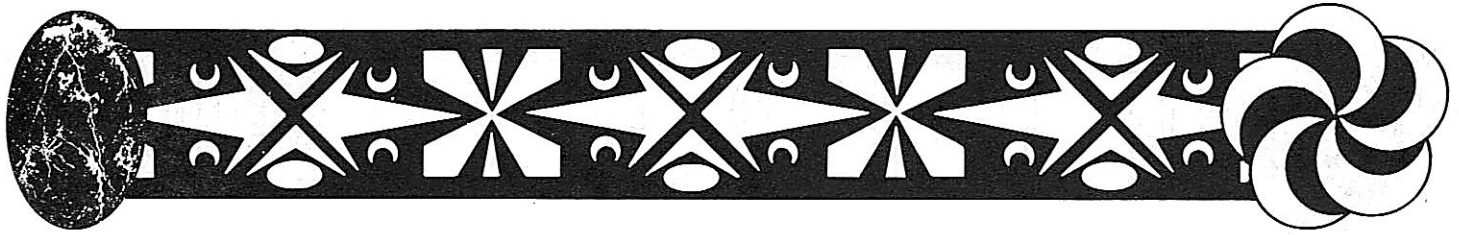
If empathic characters try to read the thoughts of someone controlled by a skullworm, they receive a clear impression of a split personality. One personality is that of the host; the other is the skullworm. In each case, the host seems relatively normal, but frightened and off balance. The skullworm, on the

other hand, strikes them as both malevolent and disdainful. It will be possible from such reading of thoughts to learn that the skullworm is a parasite living within the host. It will also be quite evident that while the skullworms find their hosts useful, they feel contempt for humans in general.

If the PCs wish to take a controlled human captive, drugging the host body will be most effective (the drug has its normal effect). If Dr. Keyet or someone else with medical skills examines the host, they find scar tissue about the size of a nickel where the larva entered the body, usually somewhere on the skull. X-ray photography (or surgical exploration) reveals the skullworm lodged between the hemispheres of the brain, with tendrils woven throughout the surrounding tissue. It is almost impossible to remove the skullworm without killing the host (a test versus one-eighth of Medical skill is required, and then only in a fully equipped operating theater). If removed from the brain, the skullworm will die in the open air and light.

Any attempt to confront the skullworms within the Demonground is extremely dangerous. Not only are there scores of skullworm-possessed humans to contend with, the area is infested with larval skullworms seeking hosts. At its heart, it is also literally choked with other types of parasites from the skullworms' realm: vines, creepers, flesh-eating plants, things like giant ticks and leeches, spores that invade body cavities and sprout there, and all sorts of other types of monstrosities. Toward the fringes of the Demonground, and along the well-patrolled paths between the skullworm-controlled regions, plant parasites are the most obvious. But in the jungle proper, the growths grow increasingly more riotous the farther the PCs progress, and eventually they begin to discover such horrors as native African animals stumbling about with fungi festooning their bodies. The referee should make it obvious to the PCs that pushing on any farther in anything less than sealed environment suits will be fatal.

Dr. Keyet and Heather Mackenzie have enough clout locally to convince the authorities to do some-



thing about the problem. Within hours, troops will come to cordon the area off, and eventually other troops will be sent in with flamethrowers to destroy the invaders. If the PCs stick around to see the project completed, they will be there when the dimensional portal is discovered. When the Brothers of Ahmed learn of the situation, they send a

specialist to close the portal.

The PCs will be given M'batu's section of Ahmed's Amulet if they helped discover the skullworms. If they entered the Demonground, Dr. Keyet insists upon examining them carefully for skullworm entry wounds before allowing them to leave the country. He calls the authorities, if necessary, to assist.

SKULLWORMS

Centipedal (Adult)

Strength: 1	Education: 0	Move: 3/6/12
Constitution: 2	Charisma: 0	Skill/Dam.: 3/1D6
Agility: 6	Empathy: 1	Hits: 4/7
Intelligence: 3	Initiative: 6	# Appear: 1

Special: In this stage, skullworms devote all their energies to breeding, then finding a suitable location to lay their eggs. They will not fight unless cornered.

Cerebral (Sedentary)

Strength: 0	Education: 1+*	Move: 0
Constitution: 1	Charisma: 0	Skill/Dam.: 0/0
Agility: 0	Empathy: 4+*	Hits: 1
Intelligence: 7	Initiative: 1	# Appear: 1

*Host's statistic.

Special: In this stage, the skullworm itself is only ever encountered if the host's skull is opened, such as during brain surgery. For all other encounters, use the host's stats for everything but Intelligence, Education, and Empathy—for those three attributes, use the skullworm's stats, as listed above.

Hatchling (Larva)

Strength: 0	Education: 1	Move: 1
Constitution: 0	Charisma: 0	Skill/Dam.: —/—
Agility: 0	Empathy: 4	Hits: 1
Intelligence: 7	Initiative: 1	# Appear: 1D6÷2

Special: Because of their small size, larval skullworms are one level more difficult than normal to hit in melee combat, and two levels more difficult in fire combat.

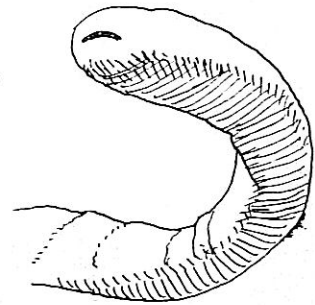
If a larval skullworm lands on a person's exposed skin or thin clothing (a shirt, for example), that character must make an Average test of Agility to brush it off before it attaches itself. (Note that a separate roll must be made for each worm.) Once a skullworm attaches, it begins to burrow into the target's flesh, doing 1 point of damage to the body location per combat phase. (Pulling it off—a

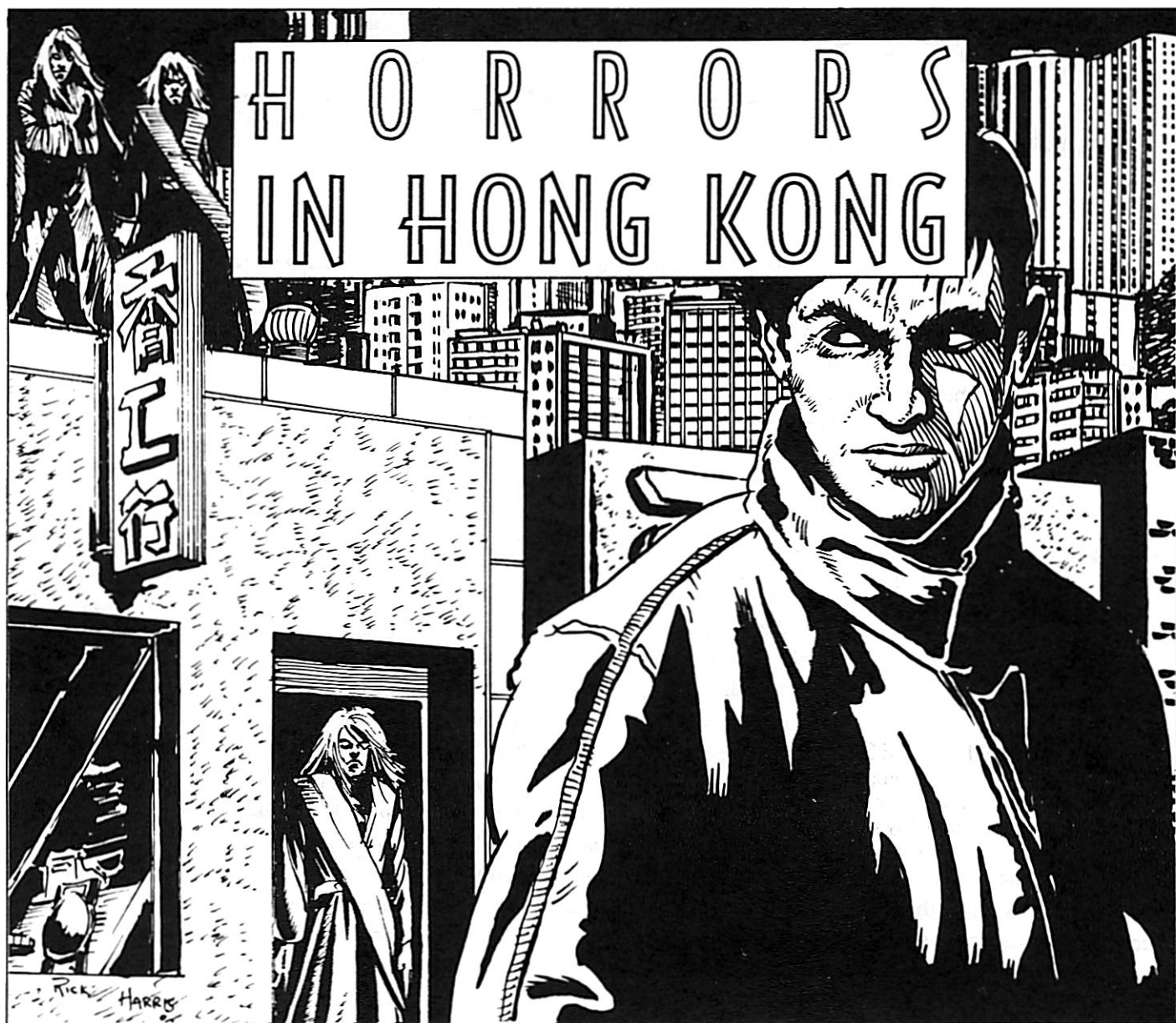
Difficult test of Agility—does 1 point of damage as well.) When a worm has done damage equal to one-half the target's Constitution rating, it has burrowed completely beneath the skin (and can only be removed surgically).

At this point, the worm begins burrowing its way slowly toward the victim's brain. How long this process will take depends upon the victim's Constitution rating. The worm requires one minute per point of the victim's Constitution to burrow from the present body location to the one next nearer to the head. Note that no significant damage is done during this burrowing, as the worm is simply working its way through the connective tissue between organs, muscles and bones. Once the worm reaches the skull, it requires 12 hours to extrude filaments into the brain and take control of the host.

For example, suppose that Sophia, a character with a Constitution of 3, has a skullworm attach itself to her left leg. Once the worm has done 1 point of damage to that leg, it is beneath her skin. Three minutes later, it leaves the leg and reaches her abdomen. Another three minutes passes, and it reaches her chest. Finally, after another three minutes, it enters her skull. Twelve hours later, the worm takes control of her.

Strong-willed persons can sometimes regain control of themselves for short periods of time even after having been invaded by a skullworm. (Referees may allow a victim to make an occasional Difficult test of Willpower to regain control for 1D6 hours.) Unfortunately, such people frequently use the time to destroy themselves.





Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony for many years. The island of Victoria was placed under mandate in 1841, and territory was added until 1898 when the New Territories were leased for 99 years. At the end of the lease, Hong Kong was ceded to the People's Republic of China—for a time. The residents feared that Peking would strip Hong Kong of its economy, and certain measures (such as the nationalization of the shipyards and the stationing of Red Army troops at former British naval bases) seemed to foreshadow the forced communization of the island city.

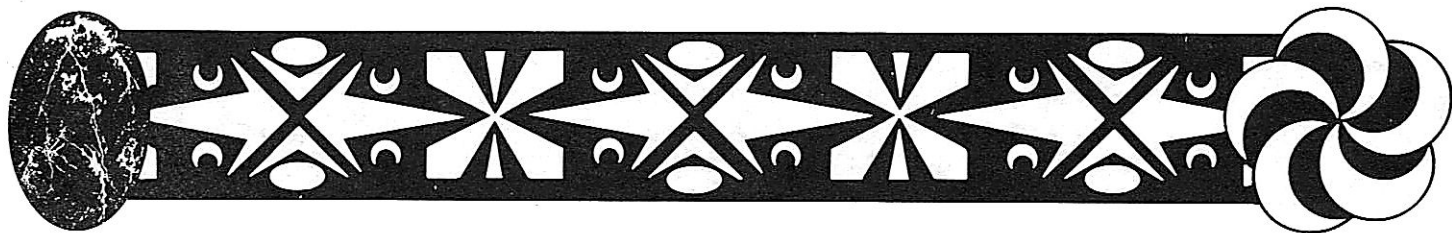
Uprisings in Heilongjiang, Sianxi and Sichuan provinces forced the Red Army to pull its troops out of Hong Kong to defend those areas. On the night of January 13, 1998, a popular militia sealed off the

old border with China, defeated the remaining Red Army troops, and declared an independent City of Hong Kong.

Today the January Rebellion is considered old history. Even though several of the remnants of the old People's Republic of China claim Hong Kong as their territory, it is very much its own city, with its own customs, its own militia, its own laws. Laissez-faire capitalism is the order of the day, and three of the world's largest corporations are headquartered there.

GETTING THERE

Hong Kong is still served by Kai Tak Airport, one of the busiest in the world. Expansions planned well before the 1997 merger with the mainland never went through, because of anxiety about the future of



Hong Kong under communist rule. The People's Republic announced plans for an enlarged airport, but were in control for too a short a time to do anything about it. And the current regime has higher priorities than enlarging the airport.

Consequently, Kai Tak gives the impression of having been a modern airport 40 or so years ago, but one that now is woefully inadequate. Passengers sit on the floors in the waiting areas, curled into sleeping bags or perched on duck-cages (complete with duck). "No Smoking" signs are constantly ignored. There is noise, shouting and confusion 24 hours a day. A plane or airship takes off or lands every 20 seconds, around the clock. It is a constant source of wonder to the locals that there has never been a major air accident at Kai Tak.

The crowding and confusion are further evidenced by the amount of time the PCs must wait to clear security and customs. In each location, the line of people waiting is very long (roll 2D6×10 for the number of minutes the PCs must wait in each location), and the terminal is sultry from a combination of too many people packed together in too little space on too hot a day with too little ventilation. The longer the characters are in line, the more they notice tempers around them rising. In fact, for every 10 minutes the characters are forced to wait, there is a 1 in 6 chance that a fistfight will break out near them over some imagined injury.

VISITING SAM KWAN

Undoubtedly, the PCs will have come to Hong Kong to talk to the present head of the House of Kwan, the merchant house which owned the Heart of Darkness in the early 1800s. When they arrive, the PCs discover that the House of Kwan is a large, well-appointed shop, with jade lions guarding the doors, comfortable chairs inside for the patrons, and exquisite jewelry on display. It is obvious that the Kwan family knows its business.

If the characters express an interest in buying jewelry directly from the house's patriarch, Sam Kwan, the salesman insists that there is no need, that he can serve them himself (the salesman is paid

SAM KWAN

Sam Kwan—the current patriarch of the Kwan family—is 55 years old. He is beginning to go gray at the temples, but is still quite active for his age. Kwan is 157 centimeters tall and about seven kilos overweight.

The House of Kwan has been in business in Hong Kong for nearly two centuries. Sometime in the 1820s, Kwan Yu Li, a chicken merchant who was fascinated with gems, joined forces with a British trader named Alvin Featherstone. By the time of the British mandate in 1841, Kwan & Featherstone was well on its way to becoming one of the largest gem and mineral houses in south China. When Featherstone died in 1862 with no known heirs, Kwan took over sole control of the business. Today, the House of Kwan still has interests in industrial minerals like bauxite and quartz, but Sam Kwan—Kwan Yu Li's great-great-grandson—considers these peripheral to his gem business.

Sam's real name is Kwan San-jyu, but most people, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, call him Sam. In addition to maintaining a large, diversified business, he runs his small gem shop like his own little fief, waiting on important customers himself. He leaves more and more of the purchasing and negotiations outside the shop to his two sons, to whom he plans to give the business when he dies.

Kwan is generally honest, but he has been known to use underhanded dealings to get his way. That is how he got the opals the PCs will be interested in: In his youth, he helped finance a group of smugglers. Kwan still has some minor connections with the Hong Kong underground, but for the most part he is strictly legit.

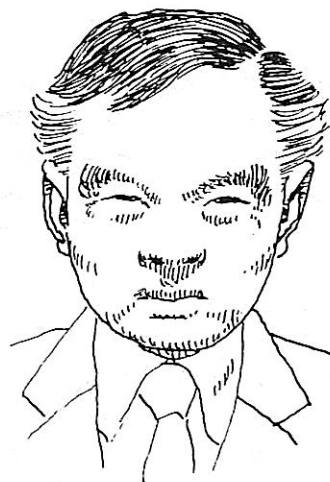
Experience: Novice

Attributes: 5; INT 8, CHR 7

Skills: 2; Act/Bluff 7, Bargain 9, Business 8, Chinese 10, English 7

Initiative: 1

Motivation: *King of Diamonds:* Sam Kwan never gives away anything. He is greedy and considers making a profit the most important thing in his life. *Seven of Spades:* Sam is also somewhat ambitious, but he considers profit to be more important than status.





THE SOUL-STONES

One of the most horrible empathic skills Fatima learned from the skullworms (see "Nightmares in Nigeria," page 38) was the ability to transfer minds from living bodies into proto-dimensional pockets, using opals as the focus point for the proto-dimensional portal. She used this ability sometimes as a punishment for particularly hated enemies, and other times as a means of assuring that a valued councillor or scholar remained at her disposal.

Separated from its body in this way, and stored within a featureless pocket, a mind could survive indefinitely, were it not for the fact that the isolation is more intense than any other experienced by human beings. Without any bodily sensations to serve as a grounding point, most minds break down from sheer loneliness, pass quickly into madness, and eventually fade away to nothing at all.

There is no way of knowing just how many minds Fatima transferred during her relatively few short years in power, but the Brothers of Ahmed suspect the number to range in the hundreds.

on commission). A sufficient "tip" to the salesman (enough to make up for any lost commission he might have made) convinces him to take the PCs to the elder Kwan; otherwise, the salesman goes on to another, more suitable-looking customer, disdainfully ignoring the party.

If the PCs grease the salesman's palm, Sam Kwan appears directly. If they do not bribe the salesman, they eventually spot Kwan on their own; they recognize him easily from his picture on a placard in the shop's entryway. In either case, when they introduce themselves, Kwan smiles, shakes their hands and offers to talk to them—as long as they make it clear that they have money to spend.

If the PCs express an interest in opals, Kwan excuses himself for a moment, then returns with an inlaid wooden case about the size of a large hat box. Whoever said Sam Kwan liked opals was understating the situation. In the box, he has hundreds of them, in every color imaginable, from light reds and oranges to deep blues and blacks. As the PCs are

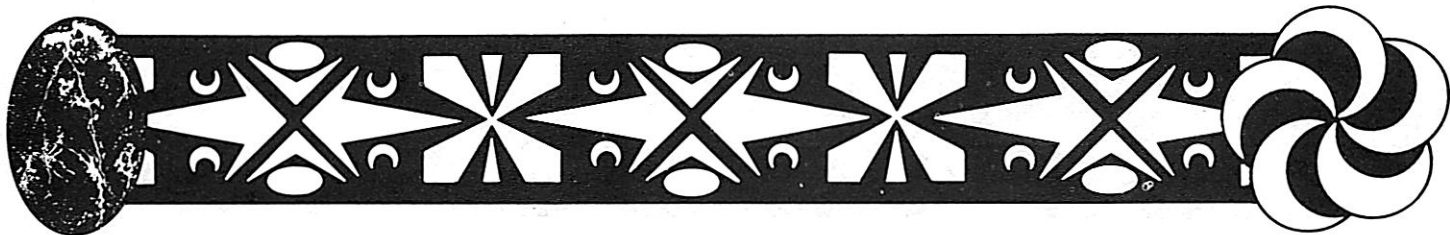
soon to discover, many of them have been "touched" by the Dark Lady.

THE SOULS IN THE STONES

As Kwan shows off his opals, characters with any Empathy rating at all must roll an Easy test of that attribute. If this roll is successful, the character notices a faint mental buzz coming from the direction of the opals. As the characters approach the opals, the buzz becomes more distinct, though not necessarily louder. If a PC actually touches the opals, an Average test of Human Empathy reveals the sound to be a collection of human screams, a chorus of desperate, soul-deep, anguished wails coming from several of the gems.

Not every opal is screaming, however—many are normal stones. Others have a residue of pain about them, as if they once contained living beings who have since died. But many of the opals are inhabited by the tormented souls of living beings. These are some of the souls Fatima imprisoned, both for redress of slights, actual and imagined, and as repositories of knowledge or empathic power. A few of the very oldest are the souls of animals—dogs and donkeys mostly—that she used as test animals while she was mastering the skill. Their cries are no less painful than those of the humans. The human souls imprisoned in the gems have been there for almost 1000 years. Most are completely insane from the loneliness, reduced to eternal, mindless wailing. Some gibber incessantly, and incomprehensibly, in Arabic. A very few still have their wits about them, even after all this time.

Characters with Human Empathy can attempt to establish mental contact with the minds imprisoned in the stones. Each attempt requires an Average test of Human Empathy. Most of the gem-souls are unable to respond, and some are articulate but mad, but a few can establish real communication with the characters. The communication will be either in Arabic or in mental images, since English didn't exist at the time of their imprisonment. Sharif Ayyub (see page 49) also knows Latin and ancient Greek, and can communicate in those languages. Speak-



ers of Hebrew and modern Greek can get the gist of what Ayyub is saying, but all rolls are one level of difficulty higher than normal.

Sam is willing to sell any of the stones—for a high enough price. If the PCs are working for Oyama, the corporation will readily authorize them to purchase any of the stones that seem to be reacting psychically. Otherwise, the PCs are on their own.

AYYUB'S STORY

The most mentally coherent of all the minds captured in the opals is that of Sharif Ayyub, a contemporary of Fatima. Ayyub has the following story to tell:

"I was a member of the caliph's court after the days of Baghdad's splendor. In essence, I was the caliph's librarian. The caliph was passionately fond of writings of all kinds. He had over 300 copies of the Koran, and one of his pet projects was to have his scribes make a giant scroll of the Book, with writing a hand's span tall. I don't think he realized when he decreed this task how time-consuming it would be, but ours was to obey. I was to supervise this great and holy task, in addition to my other duties.

"In time, I began to notice something strange about the unfolding text—errors were creeping into the work. This was not allowed, and highly unusual: Not allowed, because the Koran is the revealed word of Allah and cannot be changed; and unusual, because the scribes are supposed to check each other to make sure their copies are faithful and true. To have errors creep into the copying meant that both the scribes and their supervisors were making mistakes—something which had never happened before.

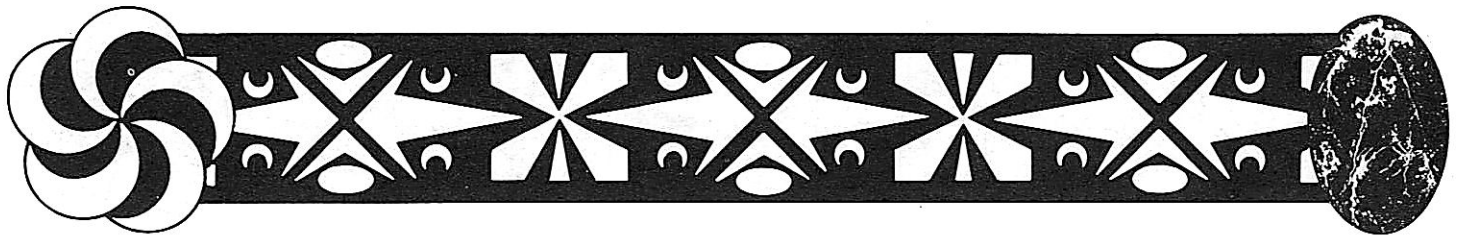
"I also noticed that many of the scribes had changed. Where before they would smile, or greet me warmly before the day's work commenced, or argue the fine points of the will of Allah, they had now become flat and lifeless. They were content to do their work, say their prayers at the appointed times—but with no real feeling—then leave at the end of the day. It was as though someone had placed a cage over their souls.

"One night I was at my post late, studying the words of the Greek, Ptolemy, while some of the scribes slept in a room nearby. Suddenly I heard a scream in the other room. I rushed in to see what the problem was. Issa, one of the younger scribes, was screaming and clutching his head. I watched in horror as, from the back of his gutra, a centipede emerged. It was as long as a small man's forearm, and as big around as his thumb. As it emerged, Issa fell over onto the tiles and screamed no more. He was dead.

"I didn't know what the creature was, but I believed it had killed Issa, so I did the only thing I could think to do. I picked up a vase and threw it at the creature, squashing it instantly. As I killed it, several of the other scribes rose from their beds. They faced me and started coming toward me. I could see no emotion in their eyes, but I could see death—or perhaps something worse. I turned and ran.

"I did not understand what was happening, but I knew who would. Faisal, one of the young men of





the court, had a reputation of being something of a wizard. Perhaps he could explain what this was, and why it was happening. I heard wizards exacted a great price, but the alternative was death, and I was sure Allah had not yet decreed my time to die.

"I rushed into Faisal's room, well ahead of the scribes. Faisal was sitting in a chair, in front of a looking-glass. I started to tell him what had happened—and immediately stopped.

"The person seated in the chair was Faisal, but yet it couldn't be. He had removed his gutra, and his hair fell down to halfway over the chair. In the looking-glass I could see that he was wearing an open vest, and beneath the vest were the breasts of a woman.

"Faisal stood. He—I still couldn't help thinking of Faisal as he, even though the evidence proved otherwise—looked at me with dark, deep eyes, eyes that went back forever into the void. 'This is truly a pity,' Faisal said. 'I've admired your work very much, and I think your researches into the

Pythagorean mysteries would eventually bear fruit. But you may be of service to me yet.' And then he pointed a gemstone at me and muttered a brief, malevolent phrase that I shudder to think of even now.

"For the brief moment while my body could still feel, I was in agonizing pain. It was as if my soul was being ripped from my body—which it was. I then felt nothing. Not the absence of pain, but no sensation at all. I was naked thought, alone in a formless universe, with nothing for company but occasional loathsome contact with the scholar I had once respected. Then even that ceased.

"That was so very long ago. Since then, three things have preserved my sanity. I have completed a universal classification, dividing everything which Allah has created into eightfold groups. I have recited the entire Koran from beginning to end. And I have lived with the knowledge that somehow, in some way, I shall exact revenge on the woman who posed as the man Faisal and stole from me my soul."

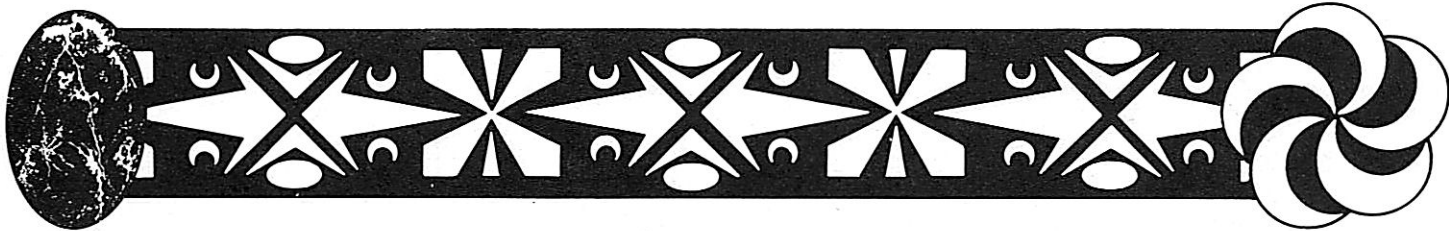
TROUBLE BEYOND THE PALE

One evening during their time in Hong Kong, as the PCs walk its streets, they hear a female scream as they pass a dim alley. No one else is around at the time, so if the screamer is to be helped, it will be up to the PCs. (If the PCs do not follow up on this the first time, the encounter can happen again—Hong Kong is a big city.)

When they go to the help of the victim, the PCs find themselves in a blind alley facing two men holding a young woman. When challenged, the men let the girl go. She stumbles, falls to the ground, then gets up and wraps her arms around a member of the party (choose at random). If the PCs turn to flee, they find their way is blocked by four more figures. These seven (yes, the girl, too) are pales (see page 226 of *Dark Conspiracy*), and they have targeted the PCs as prey.

Immediately, the pale leap at the PCs, attempting to wrestle them to the ground, so that they can leech the body heat from them. After two turns of combat,





however, an unearthly wail suddenly pierces the night from beyond the wall at the alley's end. At this sound, the pale flee down the alley and disappear into the night.

When the characters turn to face the source of the noise, they see a wizened old oriental man leaning on a cane. He laughs. "They pulled the same trick on me several years ago," he says. "I guess they still remember the thrashing they got. You are looking for information I possess. You may call me White Dragon."

White Dragon leads the party through the twists and turns of his section of Hong Kong until they come to a small door off a side street. He invites them into a room that's easily twice as big as seems possible when viewing it from the outside. If the PCs ask about the apparent discrepancy, he just smiles and says, "All is not always as it seems."

Before he answers any questions, White Dragon insists that the characters take tea with him and discuss philosophy, beauty and other such important issues. He will also want news of the outside world and is especially anxious to hear about southern China.

This is all part of his game: He doesn't mind answering questions, but enjoys conversation and wants to see just how long people will talk about abstract issues before discussing topics like "magic" (his word for empathic powers). White Dragon says that to discuss magic, the mind must be properly prepared.

At last, when he decides the time is right, White Dragon sets aside the tea dishes and answers the characters' questions. He does not go into specifics about magic, claiming that he does not take pupils, but does confirm that it exists. "For instance," he says, indicating the tea set, "take note." When the characters look, where the tea cups had been dirty and disarrayed they are now clean and neatly stacked. "My humble abode is magical as well. You noticed it when you entered; you shall notice again when you leave."

White Dragon also tells them that ancient writings tell many things about the Dark Ones who seek to

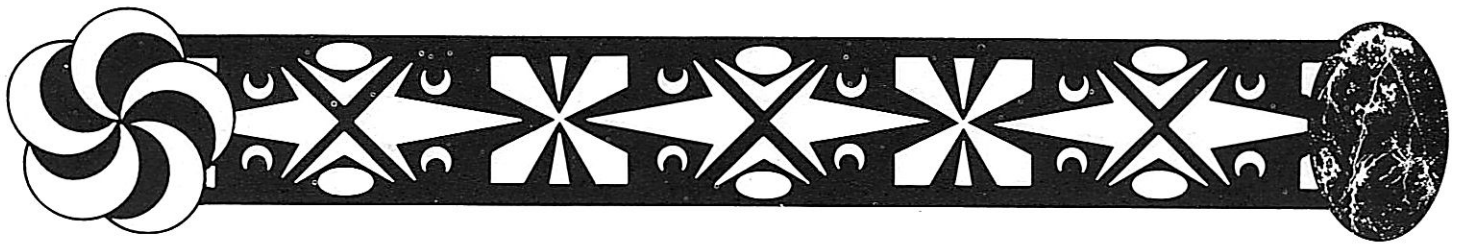


destroy the Earth. Much evil has been done by them, including the destruction of Atlantis because the mages learned too much of their nature.

When asked about opals, he briefly gets a far-away look in his eyes. "The Emperor Wu taught that opals are inherently evil," he says. "Of course, his teachings were disputed by the scholar Chan in the reign of Emperor Chou Lyan. I think there is much agreement, however, that opals represent the yang force in the universe.

"The opal has many uses in magic. Several scholars, including P'o Li and Wen Wen, mention it as a focus for magic. Those who believe in the transmigration of souls sometimes mention opals as 'way stations' for those on their way from life to life, but I personally have no knowledge of this." He laughs.

If asked specifically about the Heart of Darkness, he does not know it by that name, but if the characters describe it to him, he does recognize it. "There was word of such a stone in this area many, many years ago. It was said to be a powerful magnet for bad luck. Old Kwan Yee sold it at a loss just before



WHITE DRAGON

White Dragon is a tiny man, not quite 150 centimeters tall, and under 45 kilograms in weight. For all his age and slight build, he is quite agile and strong. He is an expert martial artist and a formidable foe. He has long, stringy, white hair and a beard to match. His eyes are dark and twinkling; his wrinkles are all of the laughing variety.

White Dragon is well-known on the streets of Hong Kong. He won't tell anyone his age, his real name, or his origins, but documentary evidence exists that says he was in Hong Kong in the 1920s, and looked much the same then as he does now. There are persistent rumors on the street that he traded his youth for a prolonged life.

These rumors are quite true. As a young boy, White Dragon apprenticed to an herbalist/spiritualist/doctor who studied magic. One day the boy found a spell that promised to allow him to live for many years. He read the spell, which taught him how to use his mind to control his body empathically. Overnight, the boy's body matured, then aged, halting finally in its present state. It has not changed since.

White Dragon left the doctor's employ and became a wanderer, travelling throughout southeastern China. He did everything from setting broken bones to putting on sleight-of-hand shows, but his real love was for the seeming magic of the empathic sense. To train his powers further, White Dragon would track down clues of herbal cures and seek spells handed down for generations in a particular village—always searching in each for the grain of truth that would lead him to further empathic mastery.

But the one thing White Dragon's developing empathic powers could not do was keep China from being taken over by the Red Army. In 1949 he returned to Hong Kong and has dwelled there ever since.

Experience: Elite

Attributes: 7; EDU 10, CHR 8, EMP 10

Skills: 6: Animal Empathy 8, Dimension Walk 6, Darkling Empathy 7, Empathic Healing 10, Foreboding 10, Human Empathy 10, Amoy 8, Arabic 7, Cantonese 10, English 8, Mandarin 10, Luck 8, Medical 7, Project Emotion 7, Project Thought 8, Psychology 8, Telekinesis 9, Willpower 10

Initiative: 5

Motivation: *Ace of Hearts:* White Dragon considers justice very important. He perceives that justice is the process of balancing yin and yang. *Jack of Hearts:* White Dragon is very wise.

he died, begging the man to take it from him. Kwan Yee was said to be a superstitious man. In Chinese the stone is called the Dark Lady."

If asked about Ahmed's Amulet or shown a piece of it, he reaches into the folds of his shirt and pulls out another piece of the amulet. "Do you mean like this?" he asks, and laughs. "I know what it is, and I know you are searching for it. How do I know? How do I know the wind is blowing on my face, or the sun is shining when my eyes are closed? I know, and that is sufficient.

"Let us bargain for this amulet. I will trade it to you. I will give you something magical. In return, someday when you visit this city again, you must bring something magical from your world for me." If the characters protest or don't feel there is any magic in their country, he simply laughs again and shakes his head. "I believe you can find something," he says. Unless the characters agree to the deal, he will not give them his piece of the amulet. (In point of fact, White Dragon has a fairly broad definition of magic, and would happily accept items such as a transistor radio or an electric razor.)

Although he knows little about the Heart of Darkness, White Dragon has discovered several facts about Ahmed's Amulet. He does not tell the PCs how he discovered these facts, but he does tell them that the amulet was made by a great wizard, a practitioner of white magic. He also tells them that the amulet will lead them to what they seek because the amulet seeks the same thing. Once the amulet finds what it seeks, it will sleep.

This is all he tells the PCs, and then reminding them of their promise to return, he gives them the amulet and bids them good-bye. As they step through his door, on an Average roll against Observation a character will notice that they are back in the alley where the pale attacked them. As before, there are no doors in the alley. Anyone leaving White Dragon's room will appear from the other side to walk out of a solid wall—but each person will appear to walk through a different section. And if the characters listen, they will hear the sound of White Dragon's laughter fading away beyond the wall.

THE DARK LADY RETURNS



Once the PCs have collected the last piece of the amulet, and have assembled the whole, the lapis lazuli stones glow briefly, then the glow subsides. Once again, any empathic characters in the area have a vision of an Arab woman in men's robes. An Easy test of Foreboding reveals another impression: The Heart of Darkness is near...very near.

While the empathic characters are caught up in these sensations, the area surrounding the group starts turning misty. Surrounding objects become more indistinct each second, and then they disappear altogether. The PCs find themselves in a very wide, gray hallway. Those with no Empathy cannot perceive anything else; those with Empathy see the spectral form of a man in Arabic dress appear in front of them. He does not speak, but merely beckons them to follow. When they do, he leads them to an open area, then disappears. Immediately thereafter, the mist begins to recede, and surrounding physical features become increasingly clear. It immediately becomes obvious that the PCs are nowhere near the location where they assembled

the amulet. (They are in a cave in Yemen, near where the Dark Lady's body is stored—but they have no way of knowing that.)

When the mist is gone, the PCs find themselves at one end of a large cavern. The air is hot and dry, but a cool breeze flows through the cave. Its source is behind the party and to one side. Toward the middle of the cavern, sunlight streams through a hole in the roof. From the angle of the beams, it must be very close to noon—the sunlight falls nearly straight downward onto a stone table in the exact center of the room. Lying on the table are a large black gem with streaks of red and a granite box of similar color.

Ahmed's Amulet is exerting an extremely strong pull toward the table. As the PCs approach the table, they discover that the gem does indeed look like an opal, and if the amulet is held next to the stone, it stops working, just as White Dragon said it would.

When one of the PCs picks up the stone, every empathic character in the area "hears" a psychic "snap," as if a bond has been broken between the



gem and the table. Immediately, Servants of the Dark Lady begin pouring into the cavern and run to attack the PCs with melee weapons. The referee should ensure that there are enough of them to make the PCs sweat for a moment, but the PCs are in no real danger at this point. It is not the Servants' purpose to stop the PCs from taking the stone, but rather to convince them that they are *barely getting away* with it. The Servants *want* the PCs to take the stone and carry it to the stronghold of their enemy, the Brothers of Ahmed. (The fact of the matter is, this stone is *not* the Heart of Darkness, but another empathically empowered opal, with a bevy of mad souls enslaved within.)

After one full combat turn, the edges of the cavern again begin to turn misty and gray. (A roll versus one-quarter of any of the PCs' Empathy ratings will reveal that Ahmed's Amulet did not trigger the transfer on its own this time; rather, the opal has taken control of the amulet and forced it to operate. The referee should make this roll secretly for each PC.) By the end of a second combat turn, the cave—and the Servants—disappear entirely, and the PCs find themselves back in the gray hallway. A light in the distance leads them back to where they were originally. To all appearances, the PCs now have the Heart of Darkness and its black stone case, as well as Ahmed's Amulet. If they try to trigger the portal again, however, they find that it is impossible.

AHMED'S AMULET GOES HOME

At this point, it is time for the PCs to take the stone to the Brothers of Ahmed.

If the PCs Are Working Alone

If the PCs have not joined forces with the Brothers of Ahmed (Oyama Corporation) before now, the reassembly of Ahmed's Amulet sends out an empathic signal that alerts the Brothers to the PCs, and the amulet itself serves as a continual beacon to their present location. A Difficult test of Empathy (or Average test of Dimension Walk, if any of the PCs has that skill) will reveal the amulet's "noise" to the PCs, but they can do next to nothing about it. The

amulet cannot be disassembled or silenced, nor can it be abandoned without abandoning the stone and box the PCs have discovered. (If the PCs try to get rid of the amulet alone, they find it reappearing in their luggage, etc.)

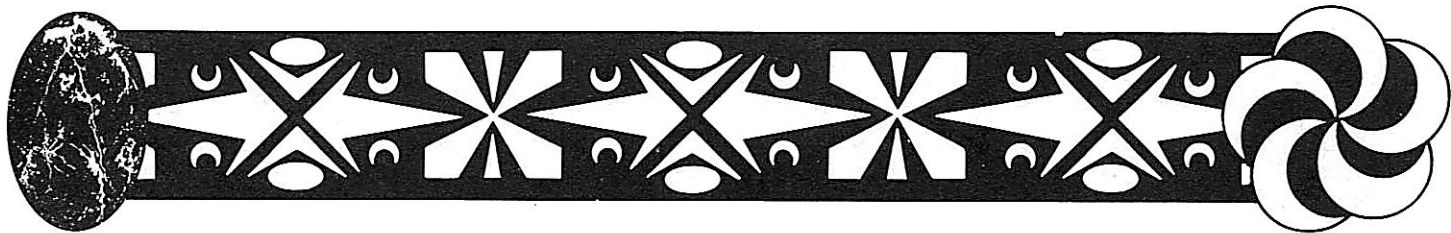
Within an hour of the amulet's assembly, a pair of Brothers show up at the PCs location (via Dimension Walk) and fill them in on the history of Fatima, the Brothers, and the Heart of Darkness. When they see the stone the PCs have captured, the two Brothers look disturbed for a moment, then whisk the PCs back (via Dimension Walk) to meet Tanomoshi in San Francisco.

If the PCs Are Working with Oyama

If the PCs are already working with Oyama Corporation (whether or not they know the corp is a front for the Brothers of Ahmed), once they have retrieved the stone, it is time for them to return to Oyama headquarters in San Francisco to collect their reward. If they choose to travel commercially, a flight will be immediately available. On the other hand, if they call Tanomoshi, he is very pleased with their performance and sends a private jet to pick them up. Either way they travel, the trip is uneventful, but it is also lengthy. If characters with computer knowledge try to spend some of the time during the flight collecting extra information from the computer for their future use, they will be successful, but Tanomoshi will, of course, be aware of their activities. His decision on how to react to this extra research will be based on the characters' behavior when they return home with the gem.

RETURNING VICTORIOUS

When the characters arrive in San Francisco, they are escorted directly to Oyama headquarters by limousine. They are not be allowed to stop on their way or to go to a hotel first. The PCs will be given a few minutes to freshen up at the corporate headquarters before being escorted into the boardroom.



When they enter the room, the PCs find Tanomoshi waiting for them, along with four more men and three women, all dressed in business suits and seated around a conference table. The characters are invited to be seated, and after a bit of small talk, a smiling Mr. Tanomoshi will ask for the stone. As he touches it, however, a flicker of disappointment crosses his face. (Each of the players should make an Easy test of Observation to notice this.) Nonetheless, Tanomoshi continues to praise the PCs for their diligence and hard work as he gently lays the gem on the table in front of him, then casually walks to a cabinet at the end of the room and presses a button on its side.

When Tanomoshi returns to the table, he asks the players to tell him exactly how they recovered the stone and where they found it. He takes a great interest in every detail of their descriptions of people they encountered while retrieving the stone. He lets them talk as long as they wish, occasionally asking a question or nodding. He does not touch the stone again, although he does look at it frequently.

While Tanomoshi listens to the characters, he is also communicating telepathically with the other board members in the room, warning them that all

is not as it seems, and instructing them to prepare themselves mentally for a battle. (Empathic PCs can overhear this communication on a successful Average test of Human Empathy.)

When the PCs have finished talking, Tanomoshi turns to them and says, "You *have* worked very hard and have done very well. In fact, you have brought the Heart of Darkness to us, but not in the way you expected. You see, this stone is not the Heart of Darkness." Tanomoshi points to the stone lying on the table before him. "According to Ahmed's Amulet," and as he lifts up the amulet, empathic characters recognize that he speaking the truth, "the Heart of Darkness is..." he points to the skylight, "up there!"

Then all hell breaks loose as the skylight crashes inward, showering the room with glass.

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

Immediately after the skylight crashes in, a dozen cables follow, and cloaked attackers in dark Arabian dress come rappeling into the room through the opening. At first glance it is impossible to tell how many people are attacking, but the PCs immediately realize that their side is outnumbered.



They have been attacked by Fatima's followers. The Servants are led by Edmund Klaus, Fatima's high priest (see page 28), who wears the real Heart of Darkness on a heavy chain around his neck. All of the attackers are heavily armed, though none is wearing armor. They have quite a few edged weapons, several handguns and a few more powerful modern weapons. They do not immediately open fire, however; Klaus wants to gloat over his ability to outwit the Brothers of Ahmed first. Four priests of Fatima go to the four corners of the room, where they fold their arms and wait. The high priest faces Tanomoshi. The other attackers surround the table, taking special care to assign armed guards to dangerous-looking board members and PCs. If the PCs attempt to fight at this point, they find guns in their bellies immediately. The high priest wants his chance to confront his archenemy.

Klaus obviously knows that Tanomoshi is the leader of the Brothers of Ahmed. The Servants have been trying to locate the headquarters of the Brothers for nearly 1000 years, but it has always been very well hidden. They allowed the PCs to retrieve the fake Heart of Darkness—which they created by

blood rites in Rio de Janeiro—and return to Oyama headquarters, because they suspected that the Brothers of Ahmed were behind their search. The fake stone contains the souls of many victims, and its power was sufficient to temporarily control Ahmed's Amulet. With the fake Heart as a beacon, Klaus has been able to trace the players to Oyama headquarters.

Klaus gloats for a few moments, waxing eloquent in Arabic, Japanese and English in turn, just to make sure everyone gets the point that he's ecstatic in his victory. Then, just as he orders his underlings to execute their captives, a new force enters the fray.

ACES IN RESERVE

When Tanomoshi pressed the button in the cabinet, he was summoning his own forces. He knew the stone was not the real Heart of Darkness as soon as he touched it. Because he is a very powerful empath, he recognized that none of the souls trapped in this stone was even empathic, let alone the powerful Fatima.

Tanomoshi's reserve forces have assembled outside the two doors to the boardroom. There are 25 allies waiting outside each door. All are Oyama employees; most are members of the Brothers of Ahmed. Some are "wizards"; others are soldiers. They are all completely devoted to getting the real Heart of Darkness and ending Fatima's threat. In fact, they care far more about retrieving and destroying the stone than about the lives of the PCs or even their own lives. For them, this is truly a final battle. They will fight to the death if necessary, and will certainly pursue the high priest of the Dark Lady if he retreats. Air and ground vehicles are already prepared for that contingency. They will have helicopters, policemen, etc. massing to follow if necessary. To finally have the Heart of Darkness in their grasp is what these people have been living for for the last 1000 years.

The members of the board of directors have no firearms, but can improvise clubs from furnishings in the room. All are Experienced NPCs; the referee should also treat them as having an average Empa-





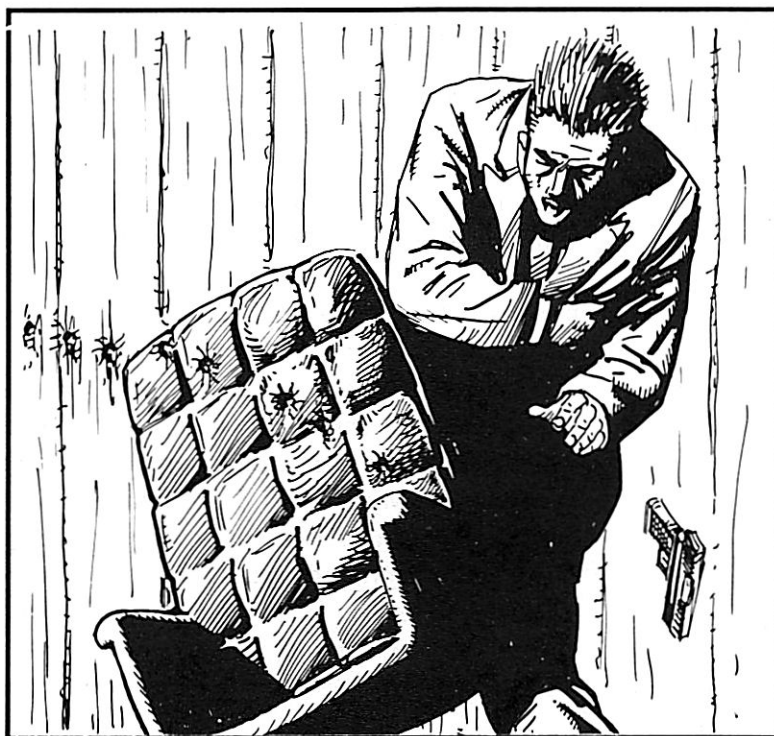
thy rating of 8, and they can use any normal empathic skills at that level, as well as the Darkling empathic skill Telekinesis.

The security guards are Veteran NPCs. Ten of them carry H&K CAWs; the rest bear Colt Kraits.

THE ENEMY

There are 40 Servants of the Dark Lady involved in the attack on Oyama. One is Edmund Klaus, Fatima's current high priest, who bears the real Heart of Darkness on a chain around his neck. The others are lesser priests and soldiers; all of the priests are "magicians." The cultists will all fight to the death if they lose the real Heart of Darkness. If, however, they are being beaten but still have the stone, they will retreat. The soldiers will protect the priests, and all the cultists will protect the high priest if he is threatened. Note that Fatima is still trapped inside the Heart of Darkness during this encounter. She will not be released for several months yet, but the PCs have no way of knowing that. And even though she cannot actually leave the gem, she can project her image out of the gem. During the battle, at a dramatically appropriate time, she fills the ceiling with a gigantic image of her face, which looms over the room, exhorting her followers to fight harder. As the battle progresses, this projection includes increasingly more of her body, and it grows more and more three-dimensional, until it seems Fatima is about to step out of the ceiling and back into the real world. It is just an illusion, however, intended to make the opposing side sweat.

The 40 attackers include the high priest, four high-level priests (the persons in the corners of the room), five combat priests and 30 ordinary thugs. Stats for the high priest are found on page 28. Stats for Fatima are found on page 67 (for referees who wish the PCs to actually encounter her). The high-level priests are all Experienced NPCs with an Empathy rating of 9; they can use all normal Empathy skills, plus the Darkling Empathy skills Dimension Walk and Pyrokinesis. The lesser priests are Novice NPCs with an Empathy rating of 6 and can use normal Empathy skills. The cult's 40 thugs



are Veteran NPCs. Ten of them carry Uzis, while the rest have AKMs.

CONDUCTING THE BATTLE

With 90 NPCs and only a handful of PCs involved in such a large-scale combat, the referee will have to take care that the players do not end up feeling that their actions have no real effect on the course of events, and that they do not stand back and watch while the referee plays both sides of the battle. There are a couple of ways to avoid this problem.

One is to focus the action on the major figures—Tanomoshi, Klaus, the PCs and maybe some of the most powerful priests from each side—and relegate the rest of the battle to background story, without actually taking combat actions or making die rolls for the minor characters. If the major characters on one side take the upper hand (in the referee's judgment), it is assumed that the minor characters on that side are doing well, as well. When using this method, the referee is recommended to roll 1D6 at the end of each combat turn for the number of minor characters wounded or killed on the winning side that turn, 2D6 for the losing side. If a 6 is rolled on

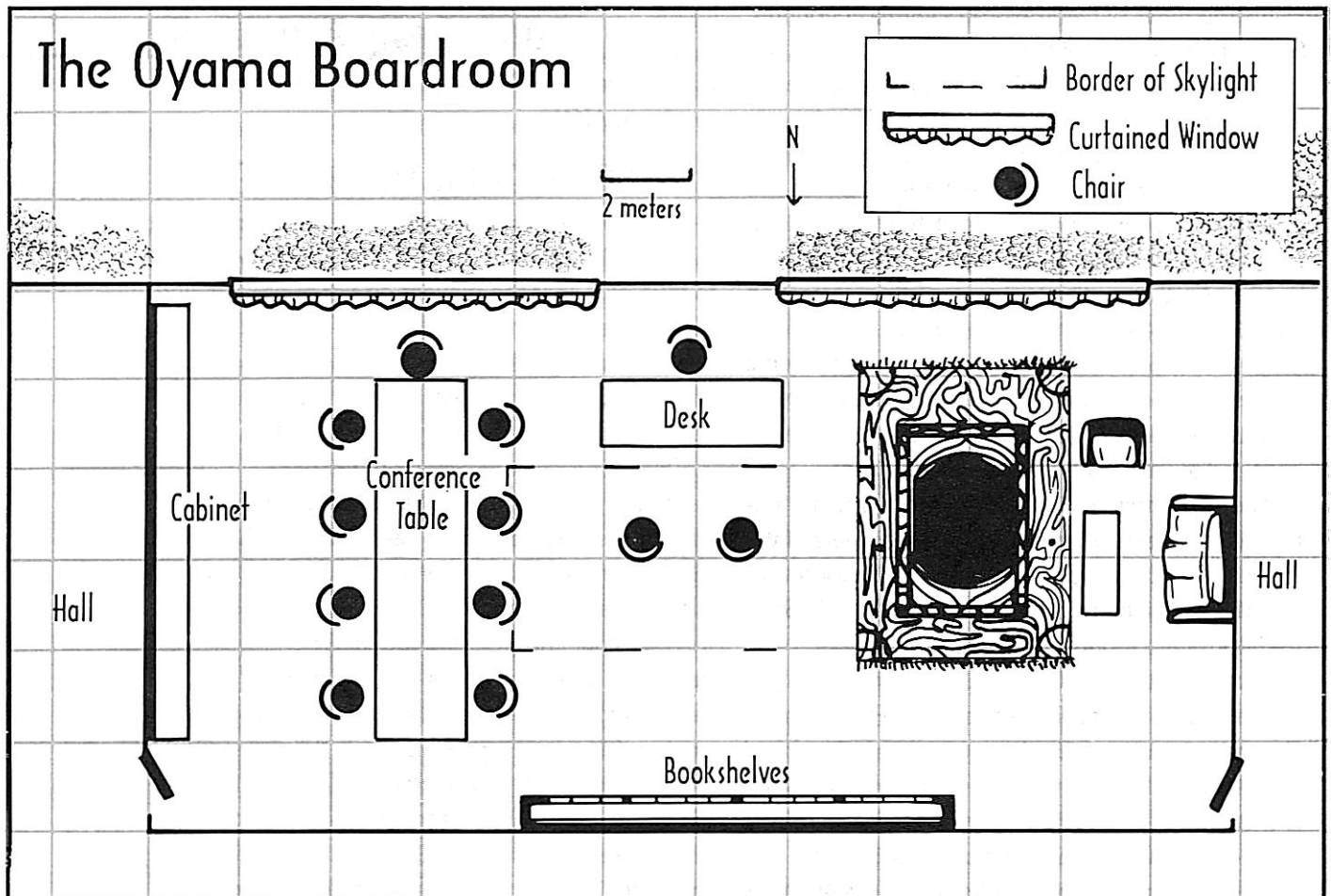


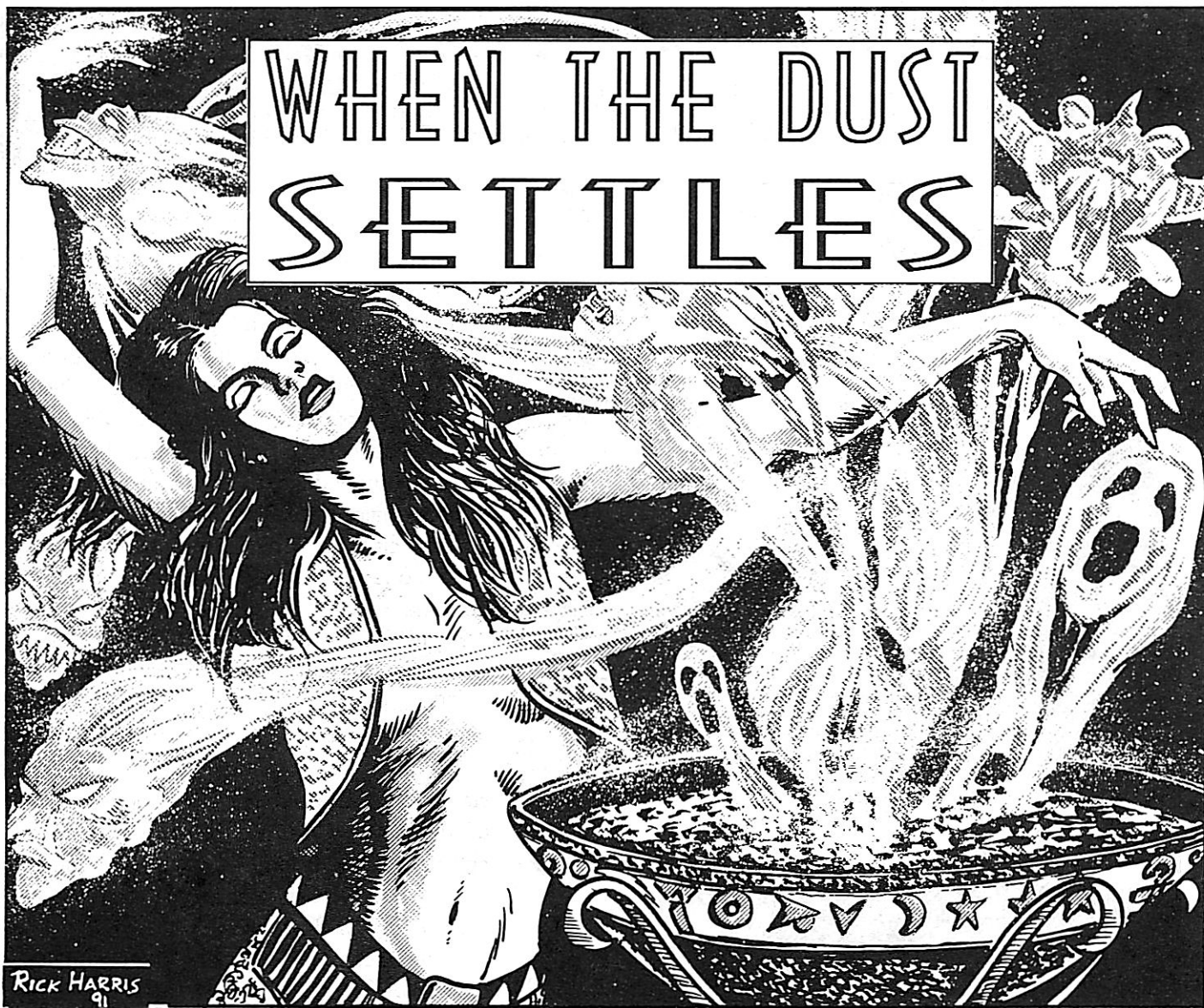
any of the dice, a major character (determined randomly) on that side also takes a stray attack from a minor character. For example, if, in the referee's judgment, Tanomoshi and the PCs have the upper hand one turn, 1D6 is rolled to determine the number of minor characters lost. If the number comes up 6, not only are six minor characters lost, Tanomoshi or one of the PCs takes a random attack from a minor character on the Servants of Fatima's side. That same turn, 2D6 are rolled for the cultists, and a roll of 12 would indicate both that 12 minor members are disabled and two major characters (Klaus and/or his best priests) take random attacks. In each case, what form the attack takes (melee, firearm, or empathic) is left for the referee to decide.

Another way of handling this large battle is to give the players the stats for all the Brothers of Ahmed and let them run them against the referee, who is

running all the Cultists of Fatima. In this case, the players will have the best image of exactly how the battle is going, but there are a couple of dangers the referee will have to avoid. One danger is that the players will not know how best to use the Brothers abilities and will end up making enough tactical mistakes to lose the battle. In this case, the referee will have to take responsibility to warn them when they are not using one or another of the Brothers to best advantage. The other danger is that the players will sacrifice the Brothers needlessly simply to save their own characters' skins. A simple warning that cowardly behavior by the PCs may result in a loss of experience points and a bad reputation among Dark Minion hunters should suffice to keep them honest.

Once a satisfying means of running the battle has been chosen, the referee can let things run to their logical conclusion.





Once the battle is over, if the Brothers of Ahmed have won, they take the Heart of Darkness into safekeeping (see "Further Adventures," on the following page, for the implications of this), and any escaping Servants of the Dark Lady go deep into hiding. In this case, the PCs receive every reward they contracted for and possibly some extras, depending upon exactly what they accomplished. If, somehow, the Servants of the Dark Lady won, the PCs will be lucky to escape with their lives, and Oyama will be thrown into an uproar, although there are other cells of the Brothers of Ahmed to regroup and attempt the fight again.

Victorious PCs receive the following:

- The amount agreed upon at the beginning of the adventure, plus the reward offered for Ahmed's Amulet, plus a \$10,000 bonus each if they did a
- truly excellent job and caused no unnecessary trouble for Oyama during the adventure.
- A bonus of 3 experience points (above and beyond what they received for each session played, including the last).
- A release form, stating that Oyama transfers ownership of the equipment used in the adventure to the character—including any hand weapons and the communications gear. The team's computer expert also receives title to the Oyama 786L.
- If the referee wishes, the PCs may also receive offers of jobs within the Oyama Corporation. Officially, these positions will be as consultants with Oyama, and the characters' skills will be used to help restructure the divisions of Oyama that dealt directly with the Heart of Darkness. Off the record, the jobs will be covers for the team, who will be



troubleshooters for Oyama and new members of the Brothers of Ahmed. These jobs will not take up all of the characters' time, but they will be on retainer and expected to respond when the corporation needs them. Their first assignment could be to determine the extent to which Fatima's Dark Minion allies, the skullworms, have invaded the planet, or to seek out Fatima's body and bring it back to Oyama.

FURTHER ADVENTURES

Of course, the best of all possible endings would have our heroes crowned with glory (and money!), the Dark Lady crushed once and for all, her Servants killed or imprisoned and the skullworms defeated or neutralized. And just as certainly, in this kind of adventure, there's no guarantee of a happy ending. Here are some ideas for further adventures:

The Dark Lady's Revenge

Capturing the Heart of Darkness has not completely thwarted the Dark Lady—after all, she's had 1000 years to make contingency plans for just this sort of thing. At some point just before the completion of the climactic battle between her cultists and the Brothers of Ahmed, Fatima was very close to breaking out of her prison. Perhaps, if her body had been present at the time, she could have occupied it once again. Instead, she managed to sink her psychic claws into one of the minor characters (ideally one of the Oyama employees). While in that body, her capabilities are very limited, but she can use it to travel back to the cave in which her own body is hidden and reunite with it.

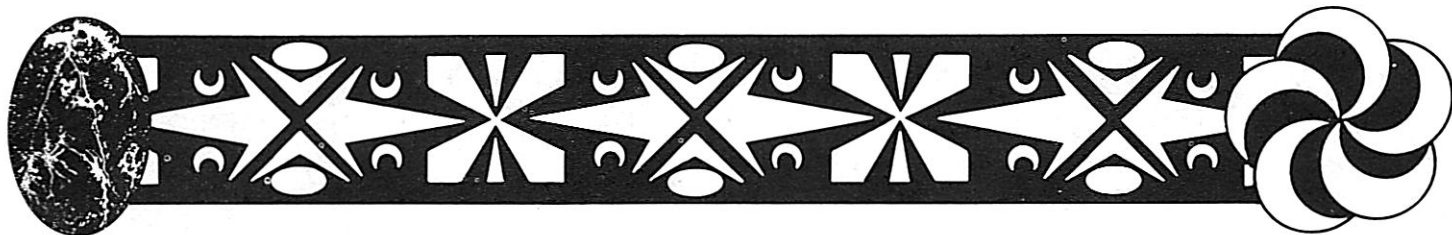
Of course, Oyama will quickly realize that one of its employees has gone missing, so the Brothers will be hot on her trail. Does she have enough of a head start to outrun a corporation with worldwide assets at its disposal? Can she contact her remaining cultists quickly enough to receive their aid? How many innocent people will she kill along the way to feed her own dark powers?

If she does regain her body, the characters will have to be on their guard from now on. The Dark Lady was enough of a threat when she was only influencing her minions from within the Heart—think of what she can do now that she can directly use her powers of persuasion!

Worm Hunt

The PCs have almost certainly discovered the existence of the skullworms and their effect on people. Suddenly, the PCs will be seeing worm-infested people everywhere—only some of whom were affected by the skullworms. Certain mental states or mind-altering drugs may produce the same outward symptoms as skullworm infestation.

This situation can be used as a recurring subplot in a **Dark Conspiracy** campaign. Any time things are going too well for the party, have a group of skullworm victims—or maybe people who act and look like victims, but are merely schizophrenic or



drug burn-out cases—appear.

Perhaps even one of the contacts the PCs have gained has been possessed by a skullworm. For example, one day the PCs receive a phone call from Dr. Keyet, all the way from Isa, Nigeria. He tells the characters he needs their help—they have to come immediately. Since a daytime phone call from Nigeria to the United States costs a fortune, they may well suspect there is some kind of emergency.

When the PCs arrive, however, Keyet is genuinely surprised to see them and denies ever calling anyone in the United States. The characters return to their hotel room, puzzled—and shortly receive another phone call from Keyet, chewing them out for not meeting him! He sounds scared and demands they come immediately, but when they return to his clinic, he is gone. Eventually, the PCs come to realize that during his pursuit of skullworm victims, Dr. Keyet has himself fallen victim to one of the creatures. By great strain of effort, he is sometimes able to regain control of his own body and call the PCs for help. But by the time they arrive, the skullworm has taken over again.

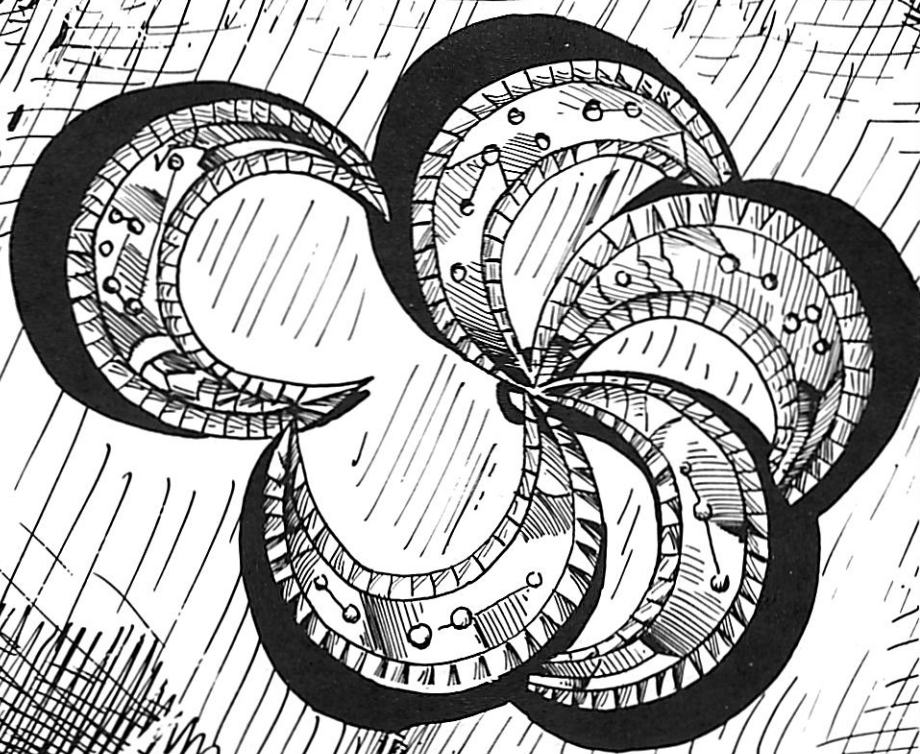
A Shadow of Their Former Selves

Just because the Dark Lady has been defeated doesn't mean that her minions have stopped the crusade, or that the Brotherhood has disbanded. Perhaps a group of Servants has dedicated itself to her return. Whether or not she can really return is immaterial; they believe she can return only if they prepare the way—which includes first wiping out the Brotherhood and retrieving certain important items, such as the gems the PCs had in their possession by the end of the adventure.

Since the Servants of the Dark Lady had safe houses and headquarters all over the world, some of them almost certainly survived the final battle with the Brothers of Ahmed. Perhaps these splinter groups are fighting among themselves for the right to control the future of the organization. Some want to help the skullworms. Some want to destroy Oyama. Others want to make a nice, comfortable living in organized crime. Perhaps some of them are controlled by new Dark Minions that they have called up to aid them in their struggle.



RESEARCH RESULTS



This chapter includes a trio of short factual entries concerning topics that the PCs may wish to investigate. Any of them may be called up on the laptop Oyama Corporation gives them if they agree to work with that corporation. Alternatively, these articles may be found from some other source (such as a public library, for instance).

THE OYAMA CORPORATION

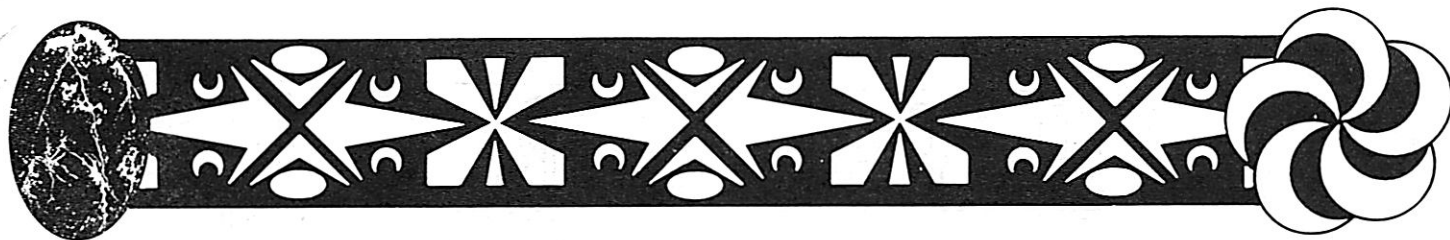
The Oyama Corporation is one of the top 25 corporations in the world. Since its founding in 1909 as a book publisher, Oyama has survived many difficulties. Today the company controls divisions with activities in nearly every research, manufacturing, technical and service business. It maintains modern facilities and provides excellent pay and benefits for its employees. There are corporate headquarters in most major countries. The primary

corporate headquarters are in Osaka, Japan. No estimates of income or net worth are available.

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

The Heart of Darkness is an almost mythological gem. It is believed to have appeared five times in the last 1200 years. The description of the stone seems to imply that these appearances were all of the same stone, although some experts suspect that the sightings were of several stones which were later cut into smaller pieces to be disposed of after their thefts. Whether one stone or several, the Heart of Darkness is shrouded in mystery.

Its first recorded appearance was nearly 1000 years ago, when a wealthy gem merchant in An Najat offered a premium price for opals, especially those of unusual size and clarity. We have no record of how the stone came to be in the possession of the



man who sold it to the merchant. The buyer recorded the purchase, size and a description of the stone in his inventory. No further reports of the stone were found for several hundred years, although it is presumed from receipts and records of the merchant that the stone was destined for the court of a minor caliph in Baghdad.

Some evidence to support this conjecture is found in the appearance in Amsterdam of a portrait featuring a large opal. The painting, *Portrait of Sultan Suleiman*, was painted by a young Dutch artist. Although the painting is not widely known, it is considered to be both a true masterpiece and an authentic portrait of the Sultan Suleiman.

The inventory of the House of Kwan, one of the largest gem merchants in Hong Kong, listed a similar stone in 1828. The stone was part of the cargo of a ship that was seized by pirates while en route to England. It has not been verified that this was indeed the Heart of Darkness, but the description of the stone is nearly identical to that recorded by the gem merchant from Baghdad.

In 1833, the stone was known to be briefly in the possession of a slave trader who operated in Africa. He claimed that the stone was in the possession of a tribal queen he captured near what is now Isa, Nigeria, and sold to a plantation owner in the US. Nothing is known of the woman after that sale. The slaver was drowned along with his entire crew and cargo later that year in a storm off the coast of Africa. The sunken ship was never located.

In 1904, a gem matching the description of the Heart was known to have been in the possession of a man named Nassir ben Yusuf, the leader of a small group of Iraqi religious fanatics. The group usually operated in the area surrounding the city of Baghdad.

The stone next appeared in 1952 in Rio de Janeiro. It was in the possession of Edmund Klaus, who was fleeing prosecution as a war criminal. It is suspected that the stone was used to bribe government officials to keep Klaus in hiding, but there is no concrete evidence. The Simon Wiesenthal Institute does list significant circumstantial evidence to support this theory, however. It is known that it was

briefly in the possession of a police officer in Rio, but later disappeared again when the officer was killed in a hit-and-run accident.

The stone, or one very much like it, was displayed briefly at the Museum of Natural History in Sydney, Australia, as a part of a gemological exhibit. Recently, the stone disappeared from the museum during the night. Interestingly, there was no evidence of a break-in and nothing else was missing. Some suspect an employee of the museum stole it, but no evidence to support this theory was ever found.

No further evidence of the stone has been found and its present location remains a mystery. Several wealthy individuals have expressed an interest in the stone if it again becomes available.

OPALS

Opal is a mineral composed of hydrated silica in the gel state. The stone varies in luster from very glossy to quite dull, and opals show extreme variations in color, ranging from white to black. They also vary from transparent to opaque. Superior stones feature a brilliant play of colors. These colors are caused by minute fissures in the stone which were filled with additional opal as the stone hardened. Although superstition states that opals bring bad luck to their owners, they have been in use as gemstones for many centuries.

Although there are many different types of opal, those used as gems are usually either transparent or translucent. White opals, black opals, fire opals (yellow to red in color), girasol opals (bluish-white opalescent), harlequin opals (those with contrasting colors in uniform patches) and lechosa opals (containing a deep green play of color within the stone) are included as gem opals. Other types of opal include the moss opal (inclusions of foreign matter appear moss-like), hydrophane opals (porous, white opal that is cloudy when dry and transparent when in water) and hyalite opals (transparent and glass-like).

The finest opals are usually found in Australia, Wales and Mexico.

REFEREE RESOURCES

This background section is a resource for the referee. Here you will find a detailed explanation of the people and things that are in action during this adventure. Not all of the information will be revealed to the PCs, but the additional information may assist you in improvising when characters make unpredictable choices and in bringing to life the NPCs and background necessary to the adventure. The additional information will also allow some customization of the adventure if desired for your campaign, and it should provide some interesting ideas and clues for further adventures in your campaign. With this information, you can also most easily adjust the difficulty of the present adventure to best match your PCs' abilities.



THE STORY OF THE DARK LADY

The court of the caliphs of Baghdad in the 10th century was in a state of decline. Legions of Turkish troops had virtually taken over the government, claiming vast areas of the caliphate as their personal domains. The power of the caliph was weakening, and he was willing to listen to the wildest suggestions to restore it.

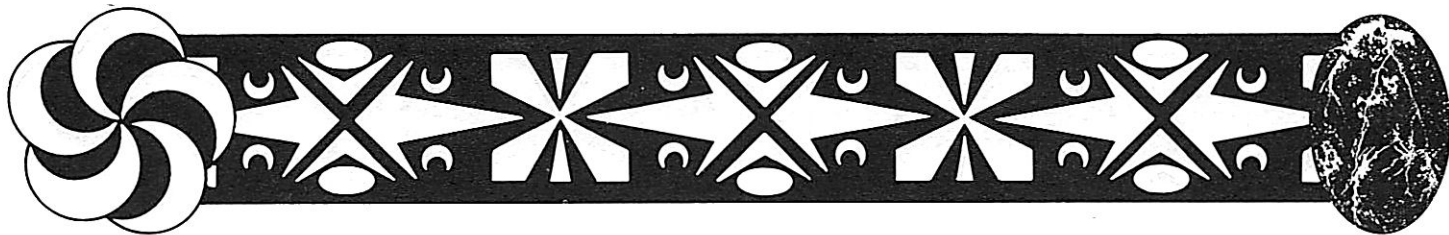
It was during this period that an elderly vizier's beloved wife died giving birth to their only child—a girl. He knew that a daughter would never be allowed to inherit his property and he desperately wanted an heir. He decided that he would announce the child as a son and educate and rear it to be his heir. His household was small and loyal and followed his instructions faithfully. The midwife who attended the birth was bribed to remain quiet. Thus Fatima Habibi became Faisal Habibi.

The child was exceptionally bright and precocious. She was doted on by her father who spent almost all of his free time teaching her everything he knew. He taught her not only facts, history and religion but also skills of diplomacy and negotiation. She also learned that when diplomacy fails, other methods, such as assassins, may solve problems.

Faisal became a favorite of the court, as well. Good looks and a quick wit endeared her to both men and women. She soon became a leader among the young men of the court. She learned her lessons on diplomacy and dirty tricks very well. Any threats to her power were eliminated. As her father aged, the caliph began more and more to seek out the advice of this charming young "man."

Fatima/Faisal quickly deduced that the reason for the caliphate's decline was the caliph himself. He was weak and indecisive, leaving major decisions to be made by the viziers. With a strong leader at the head, the caliphate could regain its power and once again become the dominant force it had been in the





including all of the black opals. The wizard felt increasingly horrified as he watched her examine the gems. He knew of evil spells which would encase the soul of a human being in such a gem. The life force of those so imprisoned could then be used by the wizard to extend his own life or to work spells. When the life force was completely expended, the gem would crumble into dust. If he was correct about her use for these gems, the wizard reasoned, she must be casting extremely complex spells to have need of such power!

Shortly thereafter, Ahmed left the court to study these spells and ways to thwart Faisal's power. He also sent messages far and wide of his need for a huge black opal. He offered a premium price for a perfect gem. One day a merchant arrived with an enormous, flawless black opal. This was the final ingredient for the wizard's attack against Fatima.

Ahmed returned to the caliph's court and again

displayed his gems for Fatima. He saved the largest gem for last. Fatima was so impressed with this gem that she failed to watch the merchant as he concentrated upon opening a portal that would imprison her mind in the gem forever. But Fatima's reactions were very quick. As the portal opened and she felt her mind being drawn away, she attacked the wizard with her own will and struck him dead on the spot. Then, with the last of her strength, she diverted the pull of the portal so that it deposited her mind in a proto-dimension slightly more accessible to her native world. It was only a matter of time, Fatima knew, before she would escape to have vengeance on the wizard's friends and compatriots.

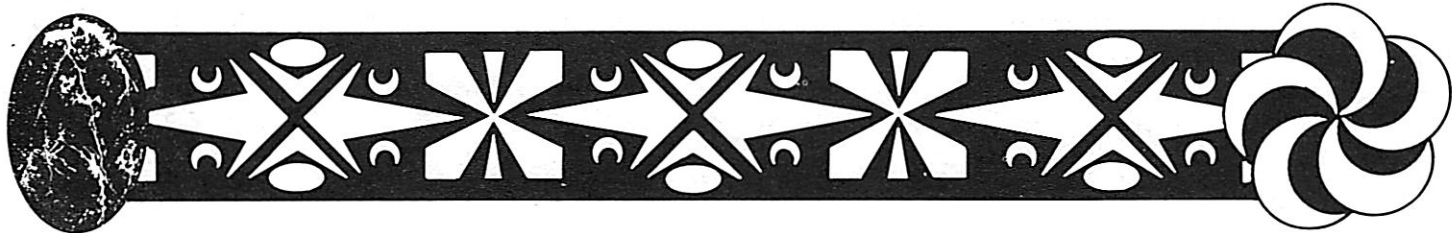
When the body of Fatima was discovered, it was assumed that she was dead. Her body was removed to be prepared for burial, and in the process it was discovered that Faisal was really a woman. The court was horrified and perplexed. Fatima's father went insane with grief and refused to allow his daughter to be buried. She was kept lying in state in her bedroom. Within days, a new horror became evident: Fatima's body was not decomposing! The courtiers were terrified. They were afraid that Fatima was still alive and were fearful of the revenge she might exact if they did not protect her body. Eventually, a cult of followers led by her mad father arose. They believed that their sole purpose in life was to guard the body of Fatima until she should return to claim it. This cult still exists and Fatima's perfect body still awaits her return.

Although Fatima remains imprisoned in the Heart of Darkness, she is far from powerless. She is able to communicate with those of her followers with Empathy. She can also draw on the power of those she imprisoned to plant suggestions in the minds of others. The skullworms still communicate with Fatima and together they plan the control of the world.

EMPATHIC VAMPIRISM

It is extremely unusual for a human being to become as empathically powerful as Fatima has. The human makeup imposes certain natural limita-





tions on such things. If humans wish to accomplish superhuman feats with their abilities, they must band together and work as a team, as in nearly every other human endeavor. But sometimes a truly evil person finds ways to enslave others or bend them to his or her own will. Such is the case with Fatima and the skill known as Empathic Vampirism.

Fatima learned the skill from the skullworms. Interestingly enough, they do not use it themselves. The Brothers of Ahmed suspect that only a very few of the skullworms ever knew of the skill, and Fatima had them killed once she had learned it.

To use Empathic Vampirism, a character first must make empathic contact with the creature to be drained, using the appropriate skill (Animal Empathy, Darkling Empathy, Human Empathy or Plant Empathy). The stage of empathic power level achieved serves as a success limiter for the Empathic Vampirism attack, which is rolled next. Empathic Vampirism siphons points *directly* and *permanently* from the target's Empathy attribute and adds them *temporarily* to each of the attacker's empathic skills. The number of stages of power level achieved with the attack determines how many points are drained.

For example, Fatima, with a Human Empathy rating of 9, decides to siphon some Empathy points from a cultist, who has a Willpower rating of 4. He is resisting, but no combat is threatening her, so she must make an Average test of her Human Empathy rating. She scores a 3, for an outstanding success, which will double her power level. Rolling for that power level, she scores a 1. Her Human Empathy rating of 9, plus the score of 1, minus the cultist's Willpower of 3, yields a 7, which is doubled to 14 because of her outstanding success on the task roll. This nets her a Stage Three success, which will serve as the limiter for her Empathic Vampirism attack. If she were to next roll exactly the same numbers for her Empathic Vampirism, she would again gain a Stage Three success, which translates into 3 points of Empathy drained permanently from the cultist. In return, Fatima would find each of her empathic skills increased by 3 points.

FATIMA

These are Fatima's statistics in case the referee decides to bring her to life at some point during the adventure. Obviously, if the referee wants to have the characters interact with Fatima while she is still inside the Heart of Darkness, some of these will no longer apply—for instance, while imprisoned in the stone she effectively has an AGL of 0.

In life Fatima was 163 centimeters tall, with long, dark hair and deep brown eyes. Her features mirrored her father's, and could be described more as "handsome" rather than "pretty"—an advantage when she wanted to pass herself off as a man. Still, she was quite capable of looking feminine when she wanted to, and would often dress as a woman and wander the streets of Baghdad—usually to find subjects for her experiments.

Her physical body is still perfectly preserved, awaiting its resurrection by her Servants.

Experience: Veteran

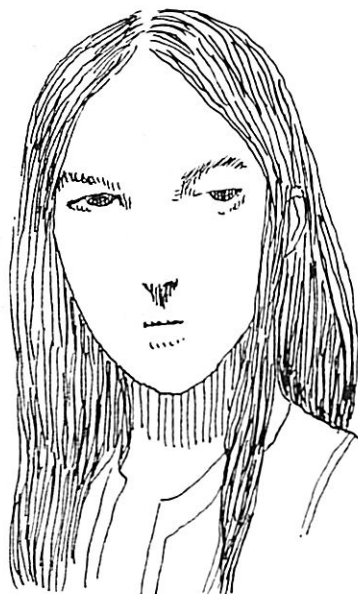
Attributes: 6; AGL 7, INT 8, EDU 8, CHR 9, EMP 10

Skills: 5; Dimension Walk 10, Empathic Vampirism* 9, Foreboding 8, Human Empathy 9, Arabic 10, English 6, Greek 8, Latin 8, Observation 8, Persuasion 9, Project Emotion 10, Project Thought 10, Willpower 10, Willpower Drain 10

Initiative: 4

Motivation: *Ace of Spades:* Fatima is a natural leader; had she been born a man, she would almost certainly have become caliph and raised Baghdad to new heights—though her methods might have been Machiavellian. Even though she has not been seen for almost 1000 years, she commands complete obedience from her Servants. *King of Clubs:* She is not above using pain as a motivating force—or for entertainment, although when she tortures for fun, she is careful not to use one of her Servants (unless he needs to be made an example of).

*This is a new Empathic skill. See the "Empathic Vampirism" section beginning on the previous page for details.





The character performing the Empathic Vampirism retains the skill boost until the boosted skill is used, immediately after which it reverts to its normal level. The maximum time that the boost can be retained, unused, is as long as the boosted character remains conscious. Sleeping, even a light doze, lets the extra power bleed away.

It is possible for the victim of the attack to be empathically healed to regain lost points of Empathy. This requires a Difficult test of Empathic Healing by someone who also knows the Empathic Vampirism skill. The stage of success in the healing is translated into points restored in the same manner that the vampiric attack is translated into points lost.

THE SERVANTS OF THE DARK LADY

The Servants of the Dark Lady is the group formed by Fatima's father to protect her body. Fatima's father was crippled with grief and became quite mad when he realized that his daughter's body was not decomposing. He was sure that this was a supernatural sign that she would be returning to him. In spite of his madness, he still controlled

considerable wealth and property, as well as great loyalty among his servants. He sold his estate and used his liquid assets to hide his daughter's body and to fortify several hiding places that could be used if others were discovered. He secretly recruited other loyal followers to help him. A fanatic cult soon evolved.

The cult is dedicated to protecting Fatima's body and the black opal that contains her soul, and to preparing the way for her return. The cultists call themselves the Servants of the Dark Lady, but are also known as the Cult of Fatima. Fatima is able to instruct them through suggestions and visions. Her power is increasing as the end of the millennium approaches. As Fatima's power grows, her cult also becomes larger and more powerful. They currently control enormous fortunes and networks of illegal activities around the world. At Fatima's directions, they are also working with the skullworms who have opened a portal and formed an enclave in Isa, Nigeria.

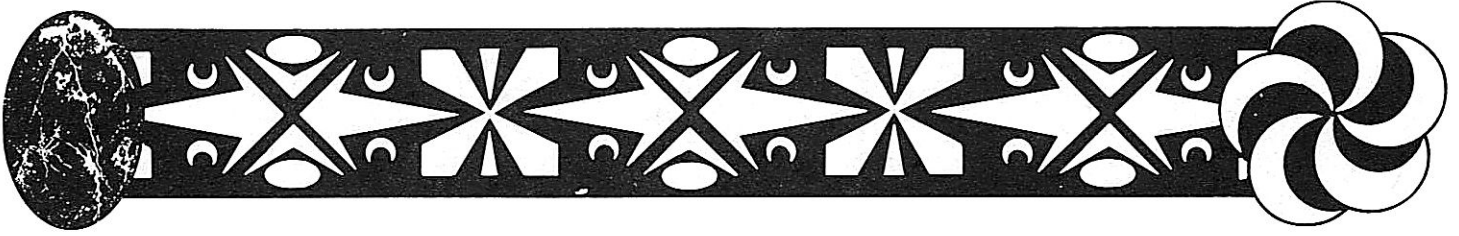
The Heart of Darkness has been temporarily lost a handful of times during their centuries of safekeeping but it has always been recovered.

The cult maintains a network of safehouses, hideouts and communication centers all over the globe. They have often had to move Fatima's body to avoid civil wars and global conflicts in various regions. Her body is currently hidden in Yemen.

THE BROTHERS OF AHMED

The Brothers of Ahmed is an organization originally created by the great wizard Ahmed, who imprisoned Fatima in the Heart of Darkness. Ahmed was not only very powerful in his time, but he also had a very strong sense of ethics. He felt that powerful people had an even greater responsibility than normal people to correct injustice, protect the innocent and improve the world. He formed a group of wizards with similar views to further these goals. The group decided that it could work most effectively if others were unaware of both its activities and its skills, because the average person is very frightened of magic, even when it is being used to his or





her advantage.

From their earliest days, the group members were convinced that there were strange and evil forces involved in the lives of humans, but they were not satisfied with any of the theological explanations of their time. Most of these mages were very powerful empaths and were sensing the meddling of the Dark Minions.

Ahmed became very concerned when he received the letter describing events surrounding Fatima/Faisal. He conferred with his colleagues before each of his meetings with Fatima, particularly before the last one, because he knew that the confrontation would be very risky. Ahmed left careful descriptions of the spell he would use, what he hoped to accomplish with it and possible results if anything went wrong.

When Ahmed was killed, the group mourned the loss of its friend and leader, but rejoiced that he had succeeded in thwarting the evil mage's reign of terror. When Ahmed's nephew went to Baghdad to

attempt to recover his body, however, he heard rumors that Fatima's body had not decomposed and speculations that she might not be dead. He returned home, buried his uncle, and began to study the writings Ahmed had left. As the young man studied the spell, he began to realize what Fatima had accomplished. If Ahmed had been completely successful, Fatima's mind would have been so completely reft from her body that her body would have died, though her mind would have continued to live in a proto-dimension almost inaccessible to the Earth.

The fact that her body remained alive meant that Fatima had been able to thwart Ahmed's spell somewhat, and in whatever dimension her mind now occupied, she was able to keep a tie to her body, one that kept that body preserved in perpetual life. Particularly horrifying to the young man was the realization that this meant the mind of Fatima remained close enough to Earth to return once she had gained sufficient strength.





The nephew consulted with the members of Ahmed's group. Unfortunately, they had no way of knowing how much longer the spell would last. They were absolutely certain, however, that if Fatima returned, she would be so on her guard as to make any further attempts to destroy her impossible. As well, they realized that if Fatima was close enough to Earth to maintain a tie to her body, she was also close enough to influence other people from her black opal prison, even to absorb the magical essence of the victims she had imprisoned in other gems. Her influence would be very weak in the beginning, but as she gained in strength, their chances of defeating her would grow increasingly slim. They had to find the Heart of Darkness and cooperate to recast their banishing spell before Fatima grew strong enough to escape.

Unfortunately, when Ahmed's friends returned to the caliph's kingdom to find the stone, Fatima's father and entire household had disappeared, taking Fatima's body and the black opal with them. The group was unable to locate the household or any

who knew of their whereabouts.

The original group now began calling themselves the Brothers of Ahmed. Now their most important task was to watch for evidence of Fatima's influence and to prepare to use the spells which would imprison her forever as soon as they could find the black opal. If they did not succeed before she returned, they would need all their skills and abilities to try to keep her from destroying the world in her vengeance and lust for power.

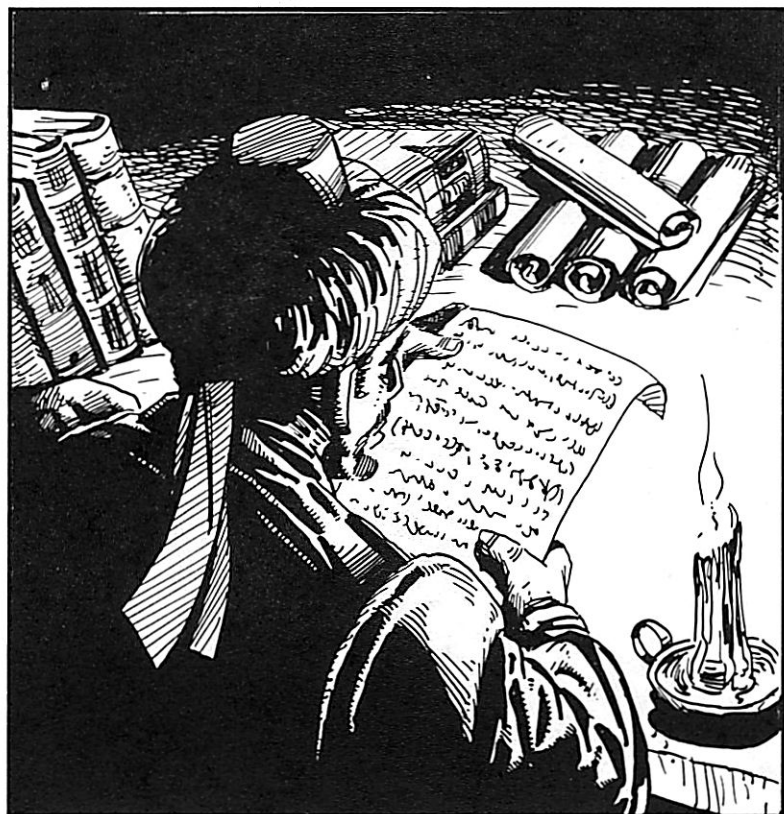
Today the descendants of this original group, as well as others who have joined over the centuries, consider Fatima to be one of the greatest threats to humanity. They are alarmed by her increasing power, and they continue to hear of strange happenings and rumors of black opals. This, coupled with evidence of her increasing partnership with Dark Minions, has lent a sense of urgency to their activities.

The Brothers of Ahmed are also heavily involved with many other organizations that are fighting the Dark Minions, but almost always with nearly invisible, though powerful, support. They avoid publicity, notoriety or anything that they feel would hamper their movements. The current leader of the organization is Mr. Tanomoshi.

In addition to fighting evil, the Brothers of Ahmed continue to study and explore magic, psionics and science. The teachings of the ancient wizards are handed down and taught to each new generation of adepts. They are especially interested in the rise of empathic powers and in the social sciences, because they suspect an evolutionary process being spurred on by the increased activities of the Dark Minions.

PROTO-DIMENSIONAL PRISONS

Although the Dimension Walk skill is generally thought of as creating a two-way portal, Fatima discovered another use for it. She learned to use opals as focal points for opening portals to very small, very primitive proto-dimensional pockets and trapping people's minds inside, where they remain until she accesses them, either for knowl-





edge, or as a ready source of empathic power to be siphoned off with her Empathic Vampirism. Those imprisoned are unable to act in any way, but they are very aware of the passage of time. Many go quite mad from boredom. The only relief from the monotony is even more terrible. When Fatima draws on the empathic essence of her victims, the experience is excruciating torture, and ends with their total destruction when she has exhausted their life force.

OPALS AND MAGIC

The priests of the Dark Lady continue Fatima's practice of imprisoning others in gems (usually black opals) so that Fatima can draw on their empathic essence to augment her own. There are many thousands of these gems in vaults in cult storehouses around the world. Many more are in use as power sources for her priests and followers.

The person who imprisons another in a stone will always know where that stone is and (depending on the remaining empathic force of the victim and the distance from the stone) can often see and hear anything that takes place in the stone's presence. Fatima always knows where each of the gems is and can relay this information to her high priests. As she has gained strength during her imprisonment, she has become able to see and hear very well through all of the stones she created. Since she imprisoned thousands of people during her brief time in power, this gives her many eyes on the world. She instructs her Servants to place these stones strategically and uses the information thus gained to increase her power. Some groupings of stones (usually bracelets or necklaces) are powerful enough to allow her long-distance control of the thoughts and actions of those who hold the gems.

Fatima is not the only person who can communicate through the stones. A person with a high level of Empathy can communicate with the person imprisoned, although the prisoner may or may not have anything useful to say. Many prisoners have been driven quite mad during their stay in their particular proto-dimensional pocket. Others were not particularly bright or interesting before they



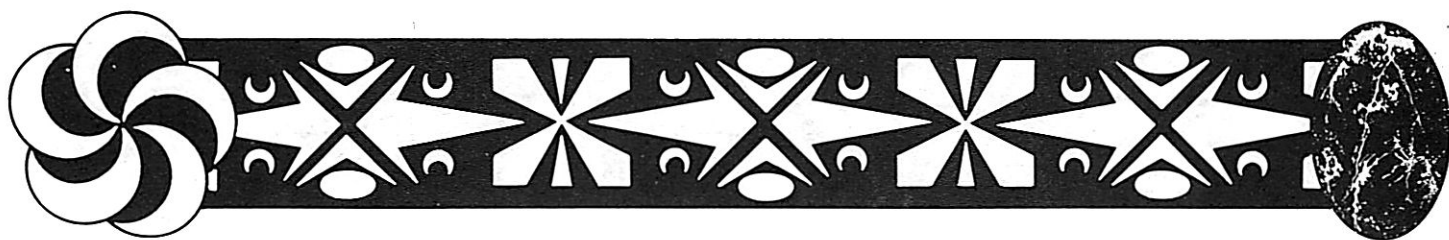
were imprisoned (although their empathic abilities may have been great).

Destroying a stone releases the soul of the person imprisoned. The stones can be destroyed by crushing or cutting them.

THE REAL OYAMA CORPORATION

The Oyama Corporation is really a front for the Brothers of Ahmed, the group founded by the wizard Ahmed to aid him in his battle against the evil Fatima. The group has remained secret for nearly 1000 years. Its goal is to find the Heart of Darkness, the opal which contains the soul of Fatima. If they succeed in recovering the opal, they will repeat Ahmed's attempt to imprison Fatima forever.

Under the guise of the Oyama Corporation, the Brothers of Ahmed have acquired a great deal of material wealth over the years. Unlike most corporations, the Brothers do not consider amassing wealth to be important in and of itself: Wealth is a tool to allow them to continue to thwart Fatima and eventually end her threat to humanity. The Brothers are also studying Dark Minion races and technology, and if they are successful in destroying Fatima's threat, will continue their fight against these evil



RENE ST. CLAIR

Rene St. Clair is provided as a means of making the adventure more challenging. She is a third party competing with the players to retrieve the Heart of Darkness, in the employ of a collector who does not realize what the gem really is.

Rene St. Clair is 53 years old, but looks 33 and shows no signs of slowing down. St. Clair is 170 centimeters tall, with a figure that one of her associates describes as "the kind that would make a train jump the tracks."

St. Clair has a reputation for finding things. She made a name for herself by unearthing—literally—two Rodin sculptures experts had not even known existed. She has also located dogs, children, errant spouses, shipwrecks, caves, and water and oil wells.

Usually, St. Clair doesn't have to worry about other people getting in her way—after all, she typically goes looking for things other people don't know are there. However, if she thinks someone is on the trail of something she is looking for, she will either cooperate with them if she thinks they can be useful (and cut out of the deal when she finds her goal) or do her best to get rid of them if she thinks they will get in her way. St. Clair considers her projects to be important enough to make anything from misdirection to murder acceptable.

As if she were not formidable enough on her own, St. Clair also has the assistance of Darkling technology to aid her in her search. She has a small block of crystal, about three inches on a side, that she can use like a crystal ball to see the area where an item is located. (She found the crystal while infiltrating a nest of insectoid ETs.) Normally the "ball" is a milky white, but if she thinks about an item (or even the possibility of an item—she discovered the Rodin sculptures while she was looking at a picture of *The Thinker*) and makes a successful Difficult test of Foreboding, a picture of the area where the item is located shows up in the crystal.

Experience: Veteran

Attributes: 6; AGL 7, INT 7, EMP 6

Skills: 5; Foreboding 7, Human Empathy 6, English 4, French 10, German 6, Luck 8, Project Emotion 6, Willpower 8

Initiative: 4

Motivation: *King of Diamonds:* St. Clair doesn't do anything for nothing—while money is not the only thing she considers when deciding whether or not to take a job, it is very high on the list. *Queen of Spades:* People who stand in the way of St. Clair's objectives are taking their lives into their own hands.

alien invaders. They can be ruthless in their economic attacks on other business when they discover Dark Minion connections; otherwise, they try to behave in an honorable fashion.

The prole compounds controlled by the Oyama Corporation have a significant difference from most other such compounds. While the corporation does wield the votes of the proles, and keeps them confined to compounds, they also educate their children and try to reintegrate them into productive society. The corporation also secretly tests for empathic ability, then carefully schools gifted students both in the use of their abilities and in avoiding detection by the public.

The Oyama Corporation feels that most of the adult proles are not recoverable due to the weight of years of repression, abuse and welfare mentality conditioning, so they prefer to concentrate on saving the children. Many of these children find jobs within the corporation, and the best of them join the Brothers of Ahmed.

In instances where adults show a desire and drive to improve their minds and skills, they are also trained and educated by the corporation. No matter how gifted, they are not brought into the ranks of the Brothers, however. This is perceived as too great a security risk. But empathic adults are trained to use and protect their abilities, and many of them find employ as special operatives.

In addition to the full ownership of the Oyama Corporation, the Brothers also control some stock in several other corporations and have agents in numerous universities and governments. They work very secretly and are careful to be subtle in fighting the Dark Minions. They know that if they draw attention to themselves, they can be destroyed despite their size and power.

The Brothers are currently becoming quite desperate to locate the Heart of Darkness. They are pretty sure that the end of Fatima's imprisonment is near, and while they have every available person on the job, they have also decided to extend their reach by hiring trustworthy outsiders, which is how the PCs have become involved.

Heart of Darkness

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

the Dark Lady, a sorceress of ancient Baghdad, has lain in mystic stasis, her mind imprisoned through the power of a legendary gem.

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

a hideous race of parasites has chafed at the wards barring them from Earth, and has labored to aid the Dark Lady who could free them.

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

the Servants of the Dark Lady have sought to destroy the mystic opal called "Heart of Darkness," to release their evil mistress into the world once again.

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS

the Brothers of Ahmed have dogged the heels of the Servants, seeking the knowledge to destroy the Dark Lady once and for all time.

YESTERDAY

your characters found a clue leading to the Heart of Darkness. Can they tread the tangled path to the Dark Lady's destruction without falling prey to the many dangers along the way?



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