

SUPERLINE



GAMEMASTER'S SERIES

A FISTFUL OF PLOT DEVICES, #1

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INTRODUCTION

SUPERHEROES SPEND A LOT OF THEIR ACTIVE TIME RESPONDING TO CRISES: SOMETHING GOES VERY WRONG, AND THEY MUST SAVE THE DAY. THIS IS A COLLECTION OF WAYS TO CREATE A CRISIS, INCLUDING PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS THAT CAN GO WRONG IN INTERESTING WAYS. THEY INCLUDE SOME (REAL OR IMPENDING) CATASTROPHES, AND ALSO SOME BASICALLY POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS THAT HAVE NIGHTMARISH POTENTIAL IN THE WRONG HANDS. THEY'RE EACH INTENDED TO PROVIDE REASONS FOR LOTS OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF HEROES TO FEEL LIKE RESPONDING, SUITABLE FOR USE IN MANY DIFFERENT CAMPAIGNS. THEY AREN'T COMPLETE ADVENTURES, BUT OPEN-ENDED STARTING POINTS.

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THE PLOT DEVICES

Each entry is organized like this:

The Situation: A concise description of the hook with which the GM can reel in the characters.

Developments: Ways things can go once the heroes rise to the challenge.

Alternatives: Some possible complications and variations, to keep jaded players on their toes.

Considerations: Things to keep in mind when preparing the plot device for use in your particular campaign.

Game Mechanics: Specific rules, where applicable.

CONDITION CRITICAL

THE SITUATION: ONE OF THE MANY BRILLIANT INVENTORS WITH MORE GENIUS THAN ATTENTION TO QUALITY CONTROL DETAILS HAS MADE AN EXPERIMENTAL POWER SOURCE THAT RUNS AMOK. IN KEEPING WITH THE COMIC-BOOK ETHOS THAT BUILDING SMALL PROTOTYPES IN REMOTE LOCALES IS FOR WIMPS, THE NEW POWER SOURCE HAS GONE ONLINE IN THE HEART OF A MAJOR CITY, EITHER ONE THE CHARACTERS INHABIT OR ONE THEY CAN GET TO READILY. NOW IT HAS TO BE CONTAINED AND SHUT DOWN BEFORE VAST CROWDS AND TRACTS OF CITY ARE OBLITERATED. THE CLOCK IS TICKING!

Developments: The power crisis evolves in four distinct steps.

- *Step 1: Malfunction.* With minutes or seconds of advance warning (or none at all), the power source runs amok.
- *Step 2: First Wave.* At this point, the power source emits unexpected energies that wreak some havoc and make it impossible for normal disaster-relief crews to approach. A force-field effect is the most common barrier, in addition to intense heat or radiation.

- *Step 3: Expanding Destruction.* The power source continues to spiral out of control, sucking up the resources it needs to consume ever more matter and energy in its vicinity.

- *Step 4: Catastrophe.* If nothing's done in time, the power source explodes in a final devastating blast. The unfortunate survivors pick up as best they can.

Alternatives: Besides relatively straightforward energy blasts, out-of-control power sources may emit exotic fields of other sorts.

Some classic possibilities:

- *Dimensional Gateway.* The power source sucks energy to or from some alien locale: a parallel universe, a remote part of the characters' universe, even the past or future of their own world.
- *Making Elementals.* People damaged by the unique energy around the power source may be transformed into creatures composed of that energy themselves. This can provide a convenient origin story for new heroes and villains, and also allow for dramatic change in the life of an existing hero. The man or woman locked into an existence as sentient plasma, or radioactive gas or radio waves, or something else other than flesh and blood is an archetypal figure of superhero stories inclined toward melodrama (or situation comedy, depending on how it's played out).

Considerations: So what is this thing, anyway? "Power source" covers a lot of possibilities. It could be a big nuclear power station or something comparable, as seen in countless documentaries about power blackouts, Three Mile Island, and the like. It might be a very small device, suitable for displaying on a lab bench surrounded by monitoring devices. If the PCs have ways of getting themselves into exotic environments and functioning there, it could be a satellite in a decaying orbit or a mining rig deep in the ocean. The GM should make sure to have a clear idea of its overall situation and nature in mind, but allow room for players to suggest details and ask questions. Sometimes a player will bring in a bit of inspiration you didn't think of, and if it fits, go right ahead and use it, since part of the point of the plot device is to be familiar.

Game Mechanics: In step 1, there are several things that PCs and others on the scene might do to help the situation. Disable Device is the skill of choice for people somewhere inside the power source, or standing nearby a small one.

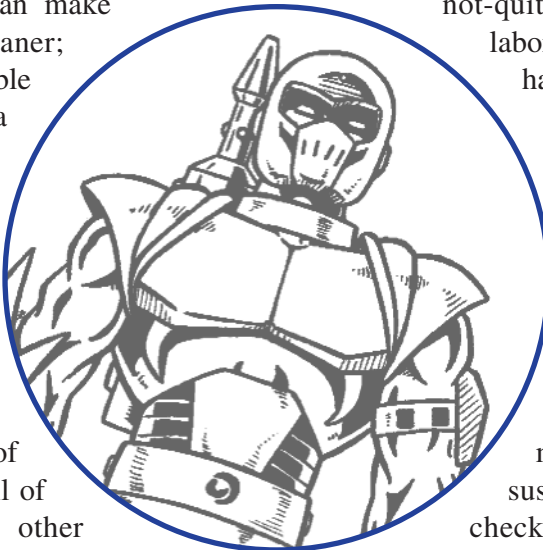
Characters watching the situation in a control room might try Computers or a relevant Profession skill. Make the DC for this high enough that the player would have to roll very, very well—maybe even requiring a natural 20—to actually stop the crisis right here. But once they've made the effort, allow a follow-up check with the same skill or straight Intelligence at half the DC to gain knowledge that can help out later. Be generous in allowing the characters circumstance bonuses for their understanding and experience so far, and players will feel that even not-immediately-successful action is well worth taking.

In step 2, the power source goes off. This involves two (or more) power effects in combination.

First, there's a straightforward Energy Blast. If the power source is big enough to have internal rooms and chambers, it fills most or all of them, and extends beyond as suits the drama of the situation. Explosions reaching across the city street to trap bystanders in a burning building, for instance, provide opportunities for heroes to make dramatic choices about their rescue priorities. (Don't use this as license to make the players feel doomed to watch many innocents die unless it's a dark and gritty campaign by mutual agreement. Bring in brave firefighters and others to help out with the situations the PCs can't cover alone.) Electricity, fire, and radiation are all standard types of energy for the blast, but almost anything can be justified by the nature of the invention. The first blast sound have a power level somewhat lower than the heroes' PL, so that they're likely to be no more than damaged by it. There will be less-powered people in the vicinity to demonstrate the perils as they get knocked out, shaken up, and otherwise injured.

Second, there's usually some generally unexpected complication. A very strong Force Field around the area is a classic one, the wave of

energy rippling and glowing with unnatural colors, and possibly expanding or contracting slightly so that bystanders may be caught inside or released without warning. Giving it extras like Deflection can make the challenge meaner; Immunity and Impenetrable make it work more like a pure plot device. It should be tough enough not to come down readily, and have the potential to reform if heroes do manage to create a temporary breach. An Energy Field embedded in the wiring of a building, the outer shell of a ship or vehicle, or other perimeter-defining structure produces much the same results.



Step 3 is just a matter of expanding the scope of the barrier described above, either by slowly moving across the terrain outside its current area of effect or leaping to the next suitable point of attachment. If crackling bolts of B-waves are running through the laboratory complex's wires and pipes, for instance, they might break loose into overhead power lines and the storm drains beneath the street to include everything within a block of the original experiment, all in a flash.

Step 4 doesn't require detailed statistics. It's a matter of narrative, and at that an optional one: just as with doomed bystanders, it's not appropriate in many superhero games. Perhaps the device finally fizzles out, and what matters is how much good the heroes did during the duration of the crisis. Perhaps its knocked-out inventor regains consciousness and can shut it down. Lots of things can resolve a crisis while leaving room for the characters' choices and action to really matter in deciding how it all turned out.

The power source itself can either be shut down or destroyed. Destroying it is a matter of overcoming its hardness, as described in "Attacking an Object" in *M&M*. Anything worthy of a not-quite-careful-enough inventor's labor is likely as hard as steel or harder, so its hardness rating will be 15 or more. If any of the heroes is particularly good at smashing things, this is a chance for that character to show off: make the hardness high enough to be a real but attainable challenge that no lesser breaker of things could manage. Electronic systems are susceptible to Computers skill checks, including the Datalink power. (This is another opportunity to showcase a power in action.) The DC for such checks should be high, because the device is both complex and unfamiliar, likely laden with poorly written and of course completely undocumented commands. Disable Device also applies in most cases.

A GM wanting to create a good "race against time" feel may want to require accumulated successes from various sources while the outer boundaries of the energy field expand, fresh energy blasts sweep through the area, and so on. Each hero must contribute a couple or more success, from skills, directed attacks at the device itself, or assaults on the barriers keeping them away, while every few rounds some fresh complication arises. Remember that even catastrophic failure on a single roll shouldn't mean instant doom: it should just mean more complications, requiring additional successes and planning to compensate.

THE PERIL FROM THE PAST

THE SITUATION: AN ANCIENT BEAST (OR PLANT!) HAS EMERGED IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. IT DOESN'T BELONG HERE, AND IN ITS CONFUSION, IT'S WREAKING CONSIDERABLE HAVOC ON ITS SURROUNDINGS. IT MUST BE STOPPED, BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW COOL IT IS, PEOPLE DESERVE NOT TO BE STEPPED ON, EATEN, OR FORCIBLY DECOMPOSED.

Developments: The prehistoric peril unfolds in three distinct steps:

- *Step 1: Remarkable Discovery.* Someone, quite possibly the PCs or established contacts and allies of theirs, finds the astonishingly preserved creature frozen in a glacier, or immobilized by unusual cases in a cave, or otherwise kept safe through the eons. With appropriate personnel and equipment providing support, they transport it to someplace it can be properly studied. Inevitably that place is in the midst of fragile things and vast crowds of people, ready to be menaced in the next step.
- *Step 2: Revival and Rampage.* The creature emerges from its dormant condition and becomes aware of its surroundings. There it finds unsuitable. By sheer force of will, or an untimely accident like a power outage, or with the help of someone who thinks that dinosaurs don't belong in cages (or that this will show the boss what a fool he is, or some other less kindly motive), the creature gets loose. Now there's a monster on the loose! Much property damage ensues; carnage may also ensue, depending on the lethality of the campaign. The heroes must find a way to stop the creature before it can do any more harm.
- *Step 3: The Aftermath.* Now the heroes have a captured creature to deal with. If it's dead, that's probably the end of the story...apart from super-science reviving it, supernatural power reanimating it, and other ways of getting dead tissue active again. If it's still alive, though, something has to be done with it. Better confinement? Sending it to some remote spot? Sending it off the planet, or out of the present? The nature of the decision and how it's made are likely to provide plot hooks of their own.

Alternatives: The creature might not be a relic of the past in any (relatively) simple way.

- *Weird Science.* The creature could be someone's present-day recreation, synthesized out of preserved DNA, brought forth by semi-controlled mutation-inducing chemicals applied to "throwback" animals, or otherwise made deliberately. Such a creature can be more purely fanciful, combining historical elements with someone's ideas for improvement and customization. It could also be more directly from the past thanks to a "time scoop" connecting different times.
- *The Living Fossil.* The creature might have been alive and well all this time someplace obscure: deep in a jungle, far beneath the surface of the sea, high in a barren mountain range.

■ *The Alien Legacy.* Humanity is seldom alone in superheroes' universes. Aliens on a survey mission millions of years ago might have collected many specimens and put them in super-science storage, then had their spacecraft crash. The contents of the storage areas wait patiently for archeologists and other explorers to discover them. Perhaps the spacecraft got off Earth and *then* ran into troubles, and has been circling the outer reaches of the solar system as an apparent comet or asteroid until a chance collision sends it hurtling toward Earth. In this case, its true nature may not become apparent until after it's struck the planet.

■ *The Extraterrestrial Peril.* Finally, the creature itself might be native to some other world. That alien survey mission could be a present-day matter and have just arrived with a cargo from one or more planets in other solar systems. If it failed long ago, it could have drifted between the stars for many millions of years until the Sun pulled it in. In comic-book terms, the difference between a dinosaur and the giant grazing cephalothong of Epsilon Eridani II is not great.

Considerations: There are some campaigns in which it'd be appropriate to confront the characters with an entirely nebulous thing of no distinct properties at all, whose nature emerges in a metaphysical reflection of their concerns and questions...but not all that many. In most cases, the GM needs to work out the nature of the creature in advance.

Simple is often very good for superheroics. The classic Big Angry Lizard is a fun challenge: it's a real menace, and fighting it effectively will take some teamwork for almost all PCs, but it's a straightforward sort of thing. Nor need it necessarily be a lizard; it could be a Big Angry Shark, or a Big Angry Cephalopod, or almost any other sort of creature, because the basic

principle of making something very large and damage-resistant and giving it an exotic attack or two to supplement its natural weaponry is easy to apply.

The creature might be a dangerous plant. The biggest problem here is that players are likely to start wondering just how threatening a fern can really be and slide into farce or satire rather than the sort of suspended-disbelief epic action that is good superheroics. So the about-to-rampage plant needs to be capable of some initial demonstration that gets characters' and players' attention, like jets of poisonous spores, stinging needles, or big gaping maws like those of Venus flytraps and pitcher plants. The plant must earn its credibility as a menace, in some quick display of lethal potential. It must also be capable of getting from where it is at the moment to fresh victims, either by growing very rapidly or by actually pulling itself around (or both).

In the real world, kudzu can grow a foot per day, and other plants do nearly as well. So the sort of while-you-watch bursts of speed required of a killer vine aren't entirely unprecedented, they're just intensified like everything else around superheroes. Nor are mobile plants impossible, since slime molds go from stationary to mobile and back again at different stages of life. A diffuse and simply structured killer plant might adopt an ooze-like nature for a while in search of prey. It could also do something more exotic like casting out tendrils to anchor itself against new targets and then haul its bulk to the new location, drawing in the tendrils as it goes. It could even launch itself into the sky, a giant version of the spiders that sail on sails made of spider silk or with the help of a membrane filled with lighter-than-air gas.

The real world provides all sorts of exotic creatures ready for rampaging. The giant mammals of the epochs between us and the dinosaurs go sadly neglected in comic book and movie storytelling, even though they were smarter and

capable of much more sophisticated behavior than almost any dinosaur. Apart from the saber-tooth tiger and occasional mastodon, the whole field is wide open for exploitation, and a GM choosing this source has the advantage of reference books in every library full of neat pictures to show players. Then there are the downright weird creatures of the Precambrian, built on body plans unlike any that now survive. A suitably enlarged *Anomalocaris* or *Hallucigenia* would provide a prehistoric thrill that isn't just what players have seen before.

Even though giant size is traditional for rampaging creatures, it's not obligatory. Velociraptors are now well established as a human-scale peril, and even one medium creature capable of swift, agile flight and possessing long-range attacks could keep a team of heroes busy for quite a while. A smaller creature is likely to combine speed with camouflage of some sort, whether it's just the ability to hide itself well or actual powers of invisibility, mimicry, and the like. The hunt for such a creature will almost always take longer than finding something big stomping buildings, and the alternating pursuit and being pursued by the thing on the hunt can be a guaranteed ticket to frustration for characters who aren't equipped for it. On the other hand, characters with good sensory apparatus (or gear) and powers that won't themselves do a lot more collateral damage might find the hunt just the right sort of challenge.

Loosely or strongly connected swarms of smaller creatures add up to a single challenge of this sort, too. They may share an inhuman hive mind, or just have very strong coordinating instincts. In either case, they can work together against humans and other targets, and being so small individually, they're hard to keep out. The swarm of killer insects of a bygone age loose inside a hospital or skyscraper provides scope for both hunting and straight-up fighting.

Remember that your campaign's rampaging creature doesn't have to have the same explanation in the game that any of its real-life inspirations do. There are past and present creatures so strange they make perfectly plausible aliens. There are books and videos speculating on the possibilities of future life, and you could move one of those species to a poorly-documented part of the past—maybe even back to the Earth's early history, before bacteria made oxygen common, so that the thing's very breath is poisonous gas. A good image or bit of information is its own justification, and since you're not presenting a claim of fact, you can put it into whatever context suits you. Tell the players the real story later, if you want to.

Game Mechanics: The classic rampaging peril from the past, as seen in countless comic books, movies, and other sources, starts off with several levels of Growth and some extra levels of Protection and Super-Strength. Protection lets it fend off nuisance attacks ("Bullets can't stop it! Rockets can't stop it! What can save us now?"), and Super-Strength lets it smash through obstacles and inflict a lot of environmental damage. Extra Armor helps if you want the peril to survive some serious counter-attacks, and don't neglect the value of a well-placed Immunity or two so that heroes have to think about indirect strategies after discovering that the obvious doesn't work.

Keep in mind that some selective defenses go well with overall damage resistance by allowing room for player ingenuity. If the King of the Dinosaurs is simply so tough that he can swat away any attack from any of the characters, the players may find the situation discouraging. If there are weaknesses for them to discover and exploit, on the other hand, they get to feel both clever and competent in their responses. Remember too that rampaging monsters provide inadvertent clues to their vulnerabilities, brushing up against an instance and shying away just where perceptive characters can see it and draw a useful conclusion.

Many rampaging perils have a particular weakness: they depend on some highly non-standard food source. This can be raw electricity, leading the creature to focus its rampages on high-power lines, generators, powered armor, and the like. It could be some form of radiation, leading it to nuclear reactors and the like (and therefore possibly triggering the plot device above). It can be almost anything that's exotic and inconvenient if ripped out of its usual place and sent down a monster's gullet. For decades, superhero team comic books had a standard plot formula, splitting up the heroes to deal with separate challenges and then reuniting for the last big showdown. Efforts to secure potential food targets and/or deal with the aftermath of earlier feeding can split up a team of characters just this way, giving each of them some spotlight time and perhaps letting those who don't do so well in straight-up fights nonetheless shine as heroes of the day in their own way.

Flaws allow you to customize the peril's powers, and you should include a few, as they give characters and players the scene of a dynamic situation that could change again at any moment. The Degrades flaw combines well with the feeding-requirement weakness, for instance; the power returns to its normal rank after the peril is exposed to enough of the normally dangerous food source that it would suffer significant damage. Instead, it charges out with fresh vitality, only to wear down again. The Slow and Tiring flaws also fit a lot of animal and plant abilities.

Rampaging perils don't always play precisely by the rules. You may wish to design your peril with a few Hero Points to use for inspiration, as discussed in the Characteristics chapter. This is the mechanical foundation for improbable escapes and other situations that are cool but not thoroughly sensible. "How did it get through such a small passage?" "If it was locked inside the hold and the door was barred from the out-



side, who killed the crew?" These and other questions are best answered with a knowing smile and a reference to the great mysteries of ancient life.

If the peril is still alive at the end of its initial rampage, the question of its long-term fate can involve as much or as little detail as you want. A quick scientific or engineering skill check can suffice to tell you that one of the characters worked out a good design that NPCs will implement, and then it's on to other challenges. On the other hand, characters with relevant skills and powers may well want to try to help the creature adjust to its new circumstances, or even try to send it back, if its method of delivery allows for that. Transporting a beast that is probably but not certainly now contained to some lasting haven is the stuff of further adventures, with potential for sequels throughout the heroes' careers.

THE DEATH CULT

THE SITUATION: A NEW ORGANIZATION IS ATTRACTING ATTENTION IN THE HEROES' VICINITY. APPARENTLY BENIGN OR AT LEAST NEUTRAL, IT'S GOT SOME PROMINENT SOCIAL GROUP THOROUGHLY HOOKED: TEENAGERS, ARISTOCRATS, ARTISTS, OR SOME OTHER READILY IDENTIFIABLE SUBCULTURE. QUITE POSSIBLY ONE OR MORE PEOPLE CLOSE TO THE HEROES BECOMES INVOLVED, SPENDING MORE AND MORE TIME AND EFFORT ON THE ORGANIZATION'S CAUSES. UNFORTUNATELY, ALL IS NOT AS INNOCENT AS IT SEEMS. BEHIND THE SCENES, RECRUITS ARE GRADUALLY DRAGGED INTO ILLEGAL AND IMMORAL ACTIVITIES, AND AT THE TOP IS SOME SINISTER MASTERMIND UP TO SOMETHING THOROUGHLY NASTY. CAN THE HEROES EXPOSE THE EVIL BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE? AND WILL THEY BE BELIEVED BY THE PEOPLE THEY'RE TRYING TO SAVE?

Developments: The cult's presence in the lives of the characters and their community has three distinct stages, with an optional but common fourth stage:

- *Stage 1: Benign Efforts, Minor Mysteries.* The group (which may not seem very cult-like at all, at first) shows up as a new force for doing good. Its leaders have successful techniques for dealing with convicted criminals, juvenile delinquents, and others who need moral guidance, setting them on the path of better behavior. Recruits spend some of their time out of sight "in training" or "on assignment", and sometimes the do-gooders end up getting in the characters' way because of different ideas about how to deal with a crisis they're both present for. But these aren't big obvious problems.
- *Stage 2: Emerging Trouble.* The characters discover that all is not well in this new organization. They may do so by their own efforts at surveillance and analysis if they're

suspicious; if not, an established NPC ally may seek them out, or the relative of an ally. In comics this is often the not-previously-mentioned sibling of a character's friend, the black sheep of the family who thought he'd go straight now but is tangled up in something even worse. At least one villain the characters have fought before is working with the organization, and it's quite clear that any change of heart the villain claims is purely superficial. Unfortunately, the organization's public face is winning it allies in the area's government and media, and nobody wants to hear sour grapes from jealous heroes. The organization's minions turn up committing acts that may or may not be strictly illegal, but certainly give their leaders information and assets that belong in better hands.

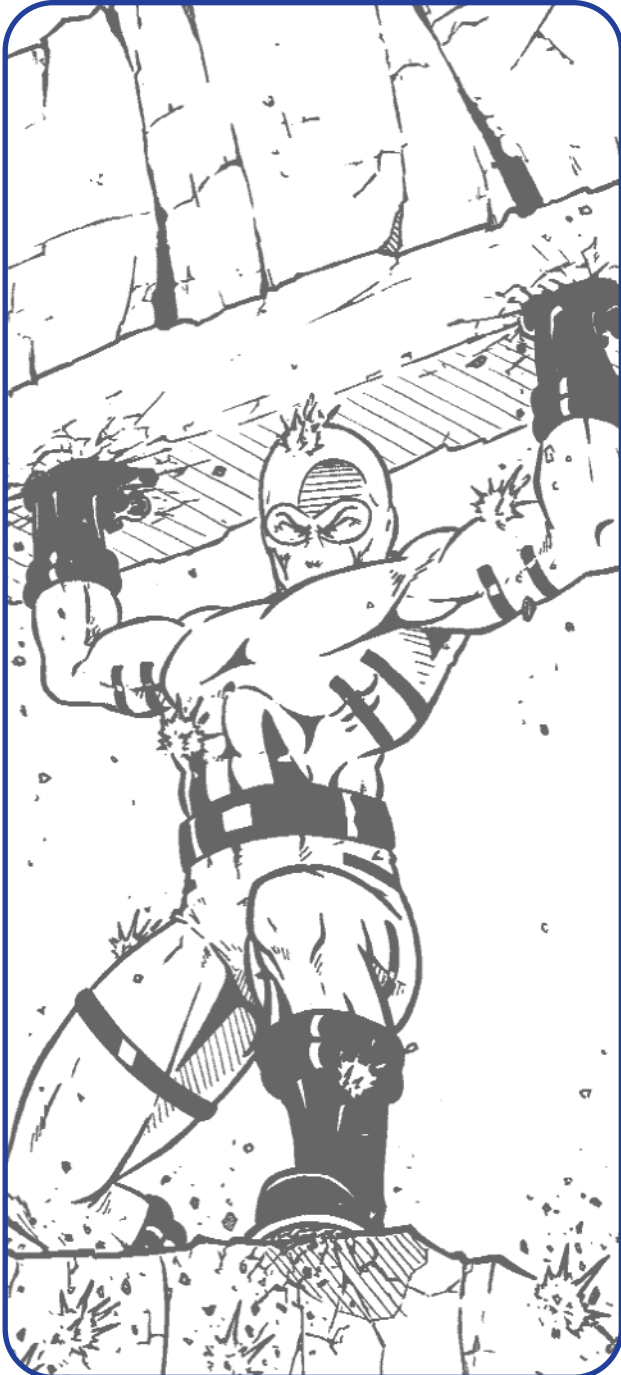
- *Stage 3: The Secret.* Some major offense, like the abuse of confidential government records passed along by brainwashed secretaries or the refusal to let now-reluctant

recruits leave, gets the heroes' attention. There's real trouble here, even though only a few crusading reporters, dedicated social workers, loyal friends or loved ones, and other wise individuals see it besides the heroes. Finally the heroes get the crucial information they need to get behind the visible organization and expose the mastermind working behind the scenes. This could well be a villain they've fought before, or who at least has been established as a presence in the campaign before; it can also be a newcomer to the scene. Evildoers are punished, their minions are brought to justice, and people of good will deal with the aftermath.

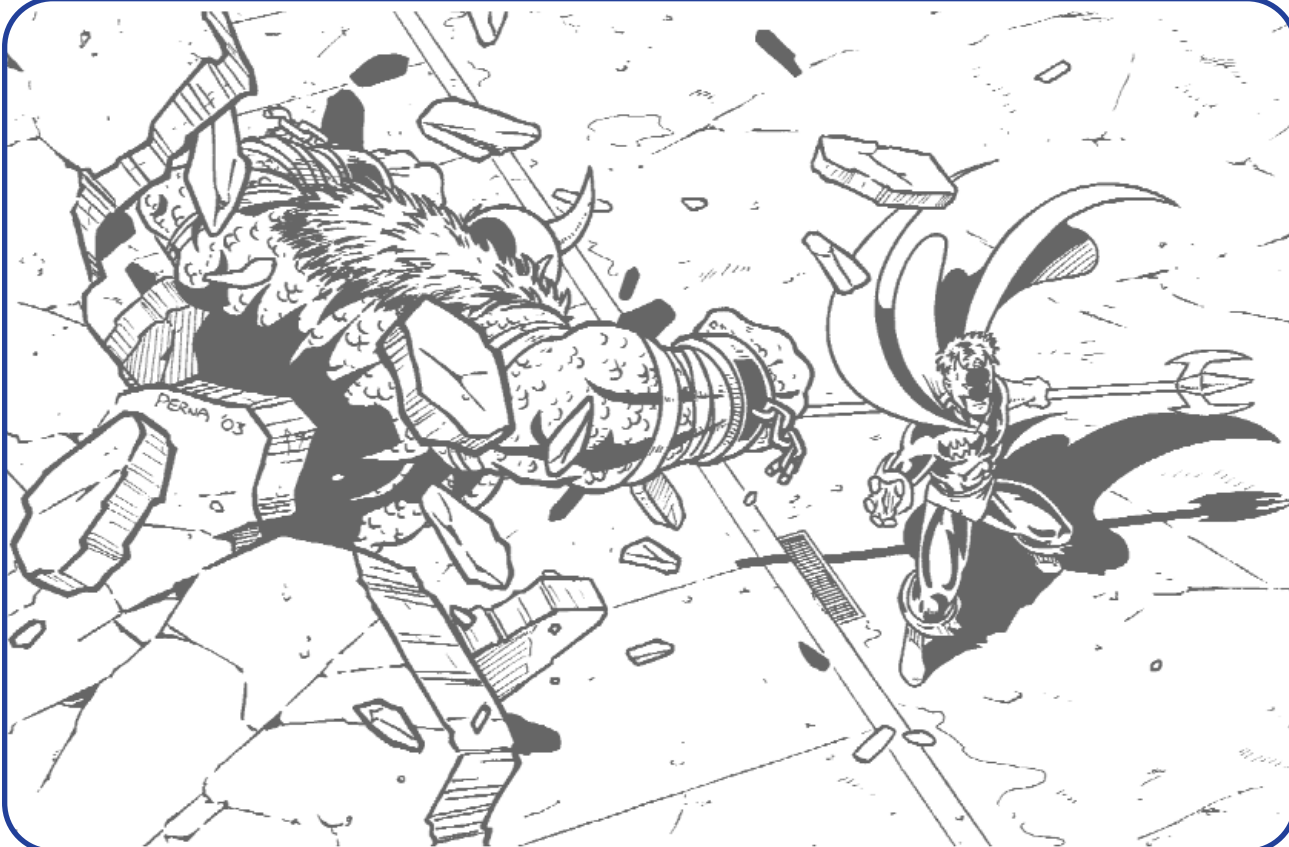
- *Stage 4: The Real Secret.* Stage 3 can be the end of things, and a very satisfying one. But there's often an additional layer of hidden evil. The mastermind the heroes took down turns out to be one more pawn, working for an even more sinister controller. This is a good opportunity to introduce a change to the boundaries of the campaign. If there haven't been active supernatural powers before, the real controller may be a demon (or an angel with real attitude problems) or a worshipper of the elder gods. If there haven't been extraterrestrials on the scene, the controller could be an alien, or a robot built by the aliens. This second showdown often begins with the heroes tired and recovering, so that they have to draw on their innate knowledge and talents rather than being able to assemble all the props they might like, and is as much a test of character as a physical fight.

Alternatives: The cult may go after the heroes early on if the heroes get in its way, and it may have a more specific agenda than "every scrap of power we can get is ours":

- *Heroes in Disgrace.* Some cults are very good at manipulating the mass media and



the opinions of authorities. If there's any preexisting spark of resentment toward or fear of the heroes, the cult can inflame it; it's also possible to manufacture scandals out of whole cloth...or, worse yet, out of the heroes' real words and deeds, put in the worst possible light. Heroes who've



enjoyed privileged status may find themselves stripped of it in stages 2 and 3. Rebuilding a shattered reputation can be a very quick task, with proof of the mastermind's machinations in hand after the heroes triumph, or an extended challenge against lingering doubts and suspicions, depending on the overall tone of the campaign.

- *The Cult's Obsession.* Power is a fine and worthy motive for any super-villain, but sometimes the secret controller wants a specific sort of power: revenge on individuals or groups, ownership of a particular book of lore or magical artifact, or owning a piece of property which (visions or statistics say) will be crucial in some future crisis. In comic books, these focused drives are usually justified by knowledge denied to most, though it's always possible for the controller to be a very powerful victim of delu-

sions. Like the general nature of the controller's power, the nature of the obsession can be a hook for further adventures.

Considerations: Handling people manipulated through their hopes and beliefs requires some tact. Comic-book cult plots often provide the writer opportunity for a little soap-box moralizing about freedom of conscience and self-determination, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it's very easy for the whole thing to come out as simply insulting caricature. As GM, you know (or have the chance to know) your players' outlooks better than a writer trying to generalize, so make decisions based on the real people you play with.

Comics creators and fans have some long-running arguments about controversial subjects in comics. Some argue that the basically simple structure of superheroes' universes make them well-suited for conveying strong clear messages

about social problems that don't normally come up in their stories. Some argue that controversial subjects are worth using only when they're handled with nuance and complexity, and that while this can be well worth doing, it may very well change the whole moral foundation of a series and its setting. Still others argue that problems calling for subtlety just aren't good subjects for superheroics at all. Good stories have been written and drawn to prove all these points, too.

It's very easy for GMs to overboard with their preparation for this sort of thing. Some players can follow a lot of exposition and respond with comments like "That's so cool! So they combine Catharist praxis with a Sethian cosmology? Rock!" Others are more likely to say "Um, so, it's kind of Christian except not, and there are snakes or something?" Provide as much detail as helps your players get a sense of the group's style and motives, but not a whole lot more. If you do want to get into historical or historically-based beliefs and structures, consider just copying a good encyclopedia article (or providing a couple well-chosen URLs) and making it available as a handout before or between sessions.

The boundary between entirely suitable and fun melodrama and unpleasant, inappropriate emotional abuse varies a lot between players, too. NPCs are there to, among other things, inspire the heroes to action when the NPCs get in trouble, so a certain level of misfortune is very much in order. People the characters care about can be deceived, manipulated, and gotten into all sorts of peril without pushing the boundaries of superhero convention at all. But heroes who just can't get a break become depressing to play, for most players, and it's easy to make irreparable changes that you as GM may regret later. Even if you don't use them later, it's often a good exercise to prepare at least one escape route for each major trau-

matic change you plan to inflict on the characters and their surroundings.

None of the above is intended to say "don't do it", though. As long as you take your players and your campaign into account and make the plot suitable for them, this kind of story can be a whole lot of fun, and it makes an engaging change of pace from other challenges. It can unfold all at once, or with the early stages woven through other stories for a good long build-up. "Be careful!" isn't the same thing as "Stop!"

Game Mechanics: Designing the villains behind the death cult is much like designing other villains. Make sure they have good social aptitude, whether through high skills and powers of their own or particularly useful minions whose loyalty they can count on. (A villain who relies too much on such a minion will of course be in trouble with the heroes manage to disable or otherwise neutralize the minion. Suddenly the mob realizes it's been mind-controlled, and its anger shifts...exit one villain as fast as possible....)

The heroes' investigation provides an opportunity to pit skill versus skill in an extended contest, if players are interested in it. Keep track of the points by which they and the cult members trying to block their search succeed at successive rolls. A player who gets a 30 on a DC 20 Computers check has a 10-point margin, for instance, while the GM rolls an 18 on the cult technician's DC 20 Computers check to maintain the internal firewalls in the face of the probing. The heroes have a 12-point lead. For every 5 points by which one side is ahead, reduce a relevant skill on the other side by 1 for the duration of the contest. or restore a damaged skill belonging to a member of that side one of its lost points. Eventually, one side or the other ends up unable to act effectively, its defenses and reserves whittled down. You can combine this with modifiers for roleplaying to taste.

THE EVIL DUPLICATE

THE SITUATION: THE HEROES BEGIN RECEIVING DISTURBING REPORTS OF ONE OF THEIR NUMBER (OR SEVERAL OF THEM) ENGAGED IN CLEARLY UN-HEROIC ACTIVITY, FROM LETTING CRIMINALS ESCAPE TO PURSUING WEALTH AND POWER BY ABUSE OF HEROIC POWER AND POSITION TO OUTRIGHT CRIME AND VILLAINY. IT'S NOT A HOAX (NOR A DREAM NOR AN IMAGINARY STORY) INVOLVING SOMEONE PRETENDING TO BE THE HERO, INVESTIGATION REVEALS: IT'S SOMEONE WHOSE VITAL SIGNS AND BIOMETRICS ARE IDENTICAL TO THE REAL THING. IT IS IN FACT AN EVIL VERSION OF THE HERO. SO THE HEROIC HERO MUST, ALONE OR WITH HELP, CONFRONT THE RIVAL, PUT A STOP TO THE VILLAINY, AND REPAIR THE DAMAGE DONE. AND THERE IS NO FOE TOUGHER THAN YOUR OWN SELF!

Developments: The crisis of duplication unfolds in three general steps. Events may not fit tidily in this particular scheme, but a progression something like this takes place:

- *Step 1: The Duplicate in the Shadows.* The GM introduces the evil duplicate into the heroes' environment but doesn't immediately tell the players about it. The duplicate gets up to its various bits of evil-doing, but only characters who make a point of actively checking up with their contacts and associates hear of anything unusual going on. The early effects of the evil duplicate's interference are small, and may well look like bad luck or someone else's fault.
- *Step 2: The Plot Unfolds.* Having insinuated itself into the hero's life, the evil duplicate goes to work trashing the hero's reputation, finances, social bonds, and general quality of life. Even the hero slowest on the uptake now realizes that something is really amiss, but is likely to spend time trying to chase

down nasty computer hackers, super-villains using disguises, and other leads that don't pan out. NPCs, and perhaps some of the other PCs as well, wonder just what's gone wrong with the hero, and speculation includes mind-control rays, consciously chosen villainy, possession, and the like.

- *Step 3: Beside Myself, Against Myself.* The hero and at least some close associates now have a good general sense of what's going on. The evil duplicate makes its move straight at the original now, in a clash exploiting its innate knowledge of the hero's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The hero may be able to call for help, but then the duplicate has had time to arrange support of its own, from hired goons to customized weapons and gadgets. If the hero triumphs, eventually the damage can all be undone. If the duplicate wins, particularly if the hero wasn't able to alert others in time, there's a new villain out there with a very secure cover story....

Alternatives: The general theme of the unexpected duplicate can express itself in several other ways, including:

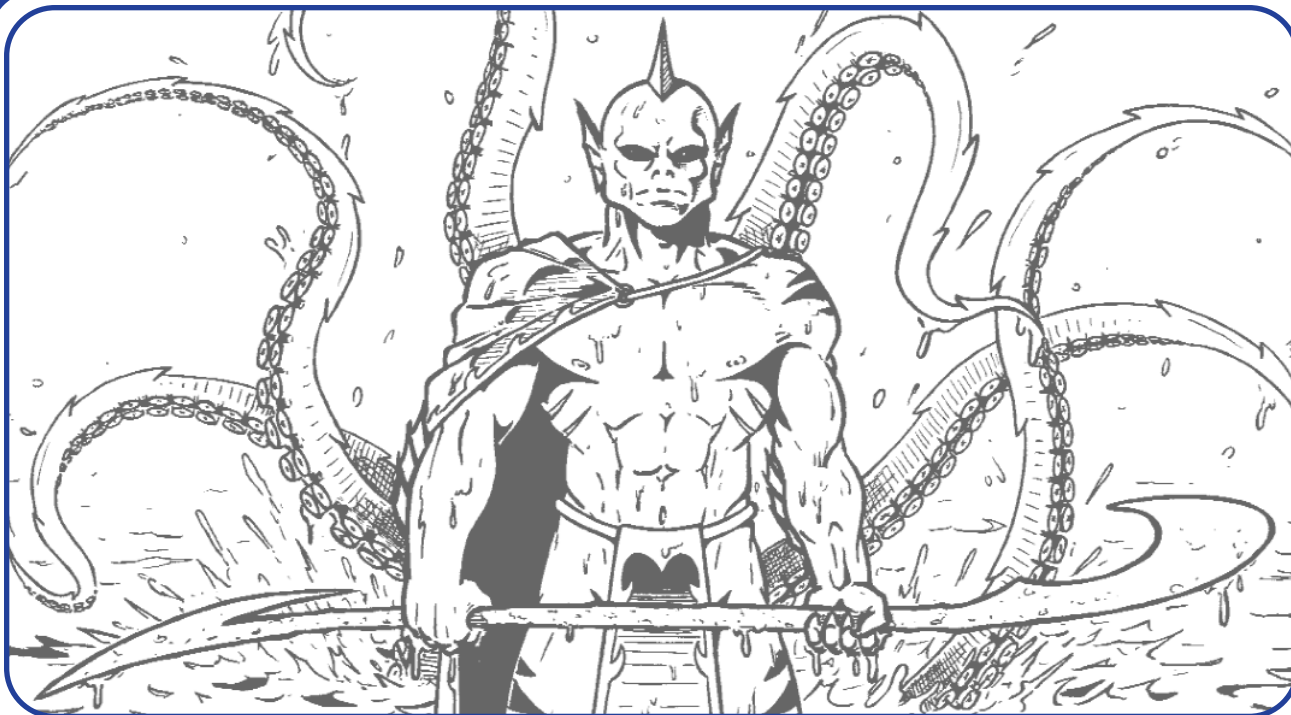
- *The Evil Within.* Rather than an external duplicate, an alternative personality dedicated to evil lurks inside the hero. It could be a demonic spirit, or a new personality created through hypnosis or mind control, or an evil ancestor or past life emerging through the mists of time. In any case, the evil within acts when the hero is asleep or distracted, and one of the signs of trouble is that the hero doesn't seem to recuperate as well as expected from regular rest. Solving the crisis means identifying and defeating the power *behind* the hero's internal division.
- *The Good Duplicate.* An established supervillain is seen doing unexpectedly good things. Change of heart? Sinister scheme masked as philanthropy? The villain continues doing the customary bad things, but with more virtue and charity mixed in all the time. In this case, the duplication process, whatever you choose to make it, got applied to one of the bad guys, and the villain is likely to be just as angry and helpless about it as many heroes. The ensuing struggle might well end with a new hero on the scene, albeit one with the villain's reputation to deal with.
- *Outright Replacement.* The evil duplicate may strike directly at the hero first, arranging to get the original out of the way. The kidnapping happens before the duplicate goes to work, so there's no question of the hero being seen in two places at once or any other such complications. See Considerations, below, for more about this and related matters.

Considerations: Perhaps the most important question to ask yourself when setting up this plot device is whether you want to let the hero's

player in on the secret. If the player can keep it, your life as GM will be greatly simplified in some crucial ways. The player can add in just the right sort of befuddled response that feeds the suspicions of other players, for instance, and may well have thoughts about vulnerable spots in the hero's life that haven't yet come into play. Furthermore, it's just plain fun to play the villain, and the player's likely to have a good time being the unsuspected ringer, particularly if you use the option for outright replacement. The hardest part may well be getting the player to stifle cackles at moments that would alert the others in the game.

As always when personal, romantic, familial, and other matters come up, you'll want to make sure to keep the villainy in bounds. Some superhero campaigns thrive on sudden tragedy from time to time; others collapse unpleasantly. If you want to push campaign boundaries a bit, consider just asking players outright about it. You don't have to give away the plot you've got in mind, just ask them how they'd feel about a trauma in the style of a well-done comic book, preferably one you can show to the players who aren't familiar with it thanks to handy trade paperback reprints. Pick one that has the general sort of trouble you've got in mind and use it as a basis for discussion. If the players don't go for it, try something else instead.

You also need to figure out just where the evil duplicate comes from. It might be the magical or technological creation of some already-established villain, or an up-and-coming challenger who sees this as the way to make a splash in villain circles. It could be a training robot built for training exercises by some covert agency, now run amok. (That happened with some regularity in some comics of the 1970s-80s.) It could be the counterpart to the hero from an alternate universe, perhaps one where good and evil roles are flip-flopped all around. It could be the hero's future self, having lapsed into villainy



thanks to future crises (or, if you want to get really twisted with the time paradoxes, because of this very crisis now).

Whatever you settle on, keep in mind one of the crucial rules for mysteries in roleplaying games: if you make everything hinge on a single clue, that's what the players will never think of and the characters will never succeed at finding. Rotten luck and differing judgment always seem to combine at times like this. Make sure that you allow at least one alternate route to every essential piece of information, and if players come up with neat lines of investigation you didn't think of, accommodate them. When you've got the destination in mind, you don't have to worry so much about each turn along the way.

Game Mechanics: In step 1, if you're using the optional campaign crisis level rules from *Crooks!*, you can introduce a mysterious drop in the public attitude toward the hero or heroes with evil duplicates on the loose. The evil duplicate's actions create sporadic -2 circumstance penalties to the good original's skill and power

checks. Further steps may bring additional drops, and perhaps drops in other levels of well-being to keep the hero and allies busy solving those problems rather than getting to the root of it all.

The evil duplicate may not be the hero's duplicate in every detail of statistics. You should certainly feel free to shuffle skill points around and even to modify powers, depending on its origins. If you're planning to have the duplicate rumble with the hero's allies along with the hero, then definitely add some powers and resources to use in the big struggle. It looks just like the hero, but—*gasp*—it's using these unsuspected abilities! (This can be a neat way to introduce new technology and props, by the way; if the heroes win, they can study the remains and have the basis for acquiring new powers of their own.) Remember that all other things being equal, the player-controlled character tends to do better simply because the player only has the one character to keep track of, while you've got the surrounding world, and don't feel guilty about giving yourself some compensatory advantages.

THE KING WITHOUT A THRONE

THE SITUATION: ONE OF THE DEFINING QUALITIES OF SUPERHEROES IS THAT THEY PROTECT THOSE WHO NEED PROTECTION. HERE COMES SOMEONE WHO NEEDS A LOT OF PROTECTION: THE RIGHTFUL HEIR TO SOME IMPORTANT INSTITUTION, WHO'S BEEN DEPOSED AND IS BEING HUNTED BY RIVALS WHO WANT TO SIMPLIFY THE SUCCESSION BY REMOVING THE HEIR. ONCE POWERFUL, NOW REDUCED TO A DESPERATE STRUGGLE MERELY TO SURVIVE, THE HEIR NEEDS HELP. CAN THE HEROES SEE THAT JUSTICE IS DONE?

Developments: This plot device brings a whole series of visitors into the characters' environment, in about this order:

- *The First Wave: The Heir.* Things begin with the heir and perhaps a few trusted companions and aides seeking out the heroes for protection. In a well-established campaign, the heir may have turned up in play before, if the heroes dealt with the deposing organization. But it's entirely in the spirit of comics to have a refugee turn up without any preamble at all. Furthermore, assassins may well be in hot pursuit, so that the first the heroes know of it, they have to deal with a tangled violent mess right on their doorstep. Once that's dealt with, there's an opportunity for exposition and the characters to consider just how they propose to help.
- *The Second Wave: The New Authorities.* After whatever initial violence there may be, a better-behaved team comes from the authorities that overthrew the heir to stake their claim. They present as much history as the characters will sit still for to establish the justice of the overthrow and the prosecution they want to mount now. Diplomatic wrangling may well ensue, along with competing efforts at winning media and popular sup-

port. Desperate antagonists may resort to blackmail and more physical forms of intimidation; depending on how morally ambiguous this conflict is, both sides can behave in much less than admirable ways.

- *The Third Wave: External Complications.* Forces outside the original dispute now try to stake their own claims. Local civil authorities may well object to carnage and mayhem. National and international peacekeepers also prefer to discourage independent violence in the service of far-away problems. Would-be mediators and would-be successors to both the deposed and deposers show up to pursue their own agendas. The heroes should have at least moments of wishing they'd never gotten involved with the mess, and it provides a good test of their loyalties and ideals.

The grand parade of claims, counter-claims, and miscellaneous complications gradually settles down, and the heroes can at last head toward some lasting resolution. Is the overthrow just in itself but the deposed heir worthy of protection? Kings in exile are common in real history as well as comics. Is the overthrow unjust but the new authority too well-established for anything short of a major war? The exiled heir can wait and prepare for the future, leaving a trail of future cam-

paigned hooks. Are both sides unjust? It would be entirely in keeping with the superheroic approach to political structure for the heroes to bring in everyone to some suitable tribunal and work with a protectorate of some sort to establish an entirely new regime. The contested throne sits waiting.

Considerations: The nature of the heir's institution depends on the campaign power level. For typical PL10 heroes, the heir can be the heir to a kingdom, the next in line for head of state of a democratic or republican regime, or some other sort of political heir. In a campaign at PL5, the heir might be the designated successor to the deceased leader of an important corporation, crime family, or private institution like a religious denomination. At higher power levels, the institution could be an empire, on or off Earth; fugitive heirs to alien thrones are by no means unknown in comic books. This plot device should present the heroes with interesting challenges, not overwhelming opposition and guaranteed defeat.

It's temptingly easy for this kind of story to get drowned in background exposition. Resist the urge to work out almanac-quality history and culture for the organization and regime involved. Keep it brief, and do rely on conventional expectations in at least some points, so that the really distinctive flourishes stand out and are easy for players to assimilate. Remember that there's nothing wrong in presenting your players with "just like *The Godfather*" or "just like *The Man in the Iron Mask*" or "long-lost Anastasia", except with their heroes able to influence the outcome.

Some campaigns thrive on incorporating real-world issues, and some don't. Presumably you know which sort yours is. Do be careful that if you base in-game events on real-world analogies and metaphors, your players won't respond by vigorously disputing the legitimacy of the comparisons and take the events as meaning something else altogether, and that they won't feel that

they could have skipped the game session and read editorials instead. Construct your situation so that it has its own internal consistency regardless of what players think about comparable situations outside the campaign.

Finally, consider whether your players really want to be the judges of a potentially international (or interplanetary, or worse) crisis. If they do, great! Carry on. If not, provide at least one graceful way for them to hand the responsibility off to authorities they can trust. In this case, their job is simply to keep the peace while other people's procedures go into effect. That can be a satisfying role as well, particularly if they get to protect genuinely innocent and needy people in the midst of a chaotic, dangerous scene.

Game Mechanics: If you want to get players involved in the social struggles possible with this plot in more mechanical depth, there are some excellent resources available made with medieval settings in mind but that adapt easily to the modern day. Supplements covering nobles and nobility, government, law, and the like are out there waiting for you. They're not appropriate for every campaign, but then nothing is, and by providing solid rules and support, they let characters with social prowess shine as clearly as sluggers and zappers do in fight scenes.

Any battle with the forces guarding and/or pursuing the deposed heir is likely to involve a lot of flunkies. Because they're easy to defeat, they provide heroes an opportunity to demonstrate their style. A bit of fun of this sort might be a welcome break in the midst of head-spinning claims and counter-claims. The leaders, on the other hand, may well possess exotic powers associated with the organization and its history: mystical powers and magical artifacts, super-science that relies on rare minerals found only in places the organization controls, and so on. As with several of these plot devices, this can be a handy way to introduce new stuff into your campaign.

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