

HUNTER

THE VIGIL

SECOND EDITION

Kickstarter Manuscript
Compact & Conspiracy Preview #7



Nine Stars & VASCU

Nine Stars

Quote: *"We will not let slashers destroy the people of Hong Kong."*

Like a rising tide, slashers crawl from the margins in ever-greater numbers, indulging their monstrous appetites upon Hong Kong's unwitting populace. Blood pools in the gutters of Hong Kong. The city's lights are ever bright, bathing its streets in a neon glow through the deepest hours of night, throwing the shadows into even starker contrast. The growing epidemic throws officers of the Hong Kong Police Force face to face with relentless killers, weird phenomena, and stomach-churning crime scenes caused by the supernatural. In this roiling crucible of horror and carnage, Nine Stars is forged.

Nine Stars is a recently formed compact founded out of necessity following the plague of slashers terrorizing Hong Kong. The compact is almost entirely embedded within the city's police force, drawn from among officers who have witnessed a slasher's anomalous capabilities or experienced the terrifying wake of a rampage — but held their nerve and asked the questions no one else dared to. It's convenient for the administration to treat slashers as nothing more than serial killers, brushed under the carpet of the yearly violent-crime figures, but Nine Stars members know how dire the situation truly is. They know the supernatural is real.

The compact principally values investigative skill in its members, backed up by a selfless dedication to duty. Members know that, at any point, they could be fired for taking the law into their own hands and disobeying orders. Ultimately, Nine Stars often prioritizes saving victims over killing slashers, and many members join the compact because they want to save the city from the supernatural. Other hunters believe that the sooner an individual slasher can be studied, predicted, and brought to a halt, the lower the cost in innocent lives will be. The compact craves a greater understanding of the slasher epidemic; discovering the cause might let them strike at the root of the problem, rather than always chasing after the gore-spattered symptoms.

Strung out across the departments of the Hong Kong Police Force as an informal network, members share information and evidence, use their leverage to promote other compact agents, and shift cases featuring supernatural or anomalous elements onto the laps of their own people. Agents are well-equipped, highly motivated, and backed by colleagues willing to cover up their trails and make problematic paperwork go away. They are often skeptical of outsiders, however, and don't always treat visiting hunters as allies until they've proven they can be trusted. Members worry they have more to lose because their careers are a tangled mess of pursuing justice while upholding the Vigil.

The closest Nine Stars has to a leader is Chief Superintendent Annie Kin-Lau, one of its founding members. She's a tough-as-nails hunter who's willing to go toe to toe with any slasher, but also has the political instincts the compact needs to survive. Under Kin-Lau's oversight, Nine Stars has gone from a last-ditch effort to wielding considerable power behind the scenes. Now, though, Nine Stars risks becoming a victim of its own success; it's drawn the attention of the Complaints and Internal Investigations Branch. After all, from the outside Nine Stars looks like any other conspiratorial network of supposedly crooked cops. Rules, when broken, tend to draw interest and hunters need to balance the weight of the Code against the demands of being a police officer.

The Enemy

Nine Stars members hold the line fearing no one else will. They know something's wrong, deep in the city's bones. It's a hunger, a ravaging appetite that seethes in Hong Kong's shadows and twists citizens into monsters. Nine Stars may not know the source of this malign presence, but they do recognize the fruits of its human corruption — the slashers plaguing the city. The compact focuses its efforts to end the corruption that threatens the safety of all and is slowly piecing together ways to capture, detain, and find new slashers before they strike.

Despite this focus, Nine Stars' members do not intentionally shy away from dealing with other supernatural predators. At its core, the compact is served by retired veterans who were traumatized by overseeing cases in areas that now spawn urban legends, such as Sau Mau Ping in the Kwun Tong district in Kowloon, the Lake Ad Excellentiam (or Lotus Pond) at Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Bride's Pool Road. The compact has learned the hard way that spirits of vengeance may be more dangerous than a cold-blooded slasher but has its hands full. Until the slasher epidemic subsides, its primary focus will be figuring out how to keep Hong Kong safe.

Hunters

You literally stumbled onto The Glutton as he was hunched over a victim, plucking out viscera and feeding it into his wide mouth as if each gobbet was a delicacy. You welcomed the Hong Kong Police Force's counseling afterward, until they kept trying to convince you your memory was faulty, that the slasher hadn't shrugged off bullets or picked you up with one hand. You were there later, in that dimly lit room, with the other officers who were too disgusted, scared, and anxious to do something. You swore the oath that forged Nine Stars.

No one could figure out how the Cardboard Killer got into her victims' homes, but something in your gut told you Mrs. Fang was next on the list. You broke the rules, broke into Mrs. Fang's home, and saw the stomach-churning way the Cardboard Killer entered the apartment. You were disciplined for your actions — but you also saved Mrs. Fang. The superintendent pressed a single gleaming star into your lapel and told you to come meet him in the bar that night.

You're on the Serial & Spree Killer Special Response Task Force, a hotshot young officer armed to the teeth with the best gear your precinct could provide. The veterans keep muttering about killers who are inhumanly strong or tough. You haven't yet gone on your first dispatchment, but you'll show the timid old timers you've got what it takes. You're not afraid of anything and scoff at urban legends about bulletproof murderers and hungry ghosts.

You never caused trouble. You spent months methodically putting together the villain-hitting case; the woman practicing *da siu yun* who made sure her petty "curses" always worked because she brutally murdered the targets. You carefully cracked the mysterious Cure Murderer cases and discovered a doctor who was injecting a deadly cocktail of drugs and viruses that drove his patients mad. You dutifully excised every part from the reports that would upset your senior officers. One day, Chief Superintendent Kin-Lau called you to a meeting, more interested in what you'd been leaving out than what you'd been keeping in.

Fellowships

Compact members are awarded stars following their service to the people of Hong Kong. A case or incident where an officer successfully saves any lives wins them one star — with nine stars

being the highest grade that can be achieved. Additionally, Nine Stars is roughly divided among three fellowships.

Those officers under the umbrella of **Special Response** focus on the slasher epidemic troubling Hong Kong. Forming the bulk of the compact, Special Response coordinates the analysis of slasher outbreaks and helps reassign members to cases involving suspected or confirmed slasher activity.

By comparison, **Five and Nine** is a smaller, informal network of retired officers. Five and Nine is assigned to investigating other supernatural phenomena the Hong Kong police stumble upon and includes the compact's most learned occultists and experienced agents. When a breath-drinking vampire or shapeshifting demon rears its head, Nine Stars looks to these grizzled veterans for guidance.

Most Nine Stars members are officers on active duty in the Hong Kong Police Force, but the **Friendly Hands** are outsiders who've been temporarily welcomed into the fold. Used as a sarcastic term, the Friendly Hands are kept at a safe-but-useful distance, for its members are a motley group of gang members, ex-cons, petty thieves, and dirty politicians who'd rather work with police to end the slasher epidemic than flee the city. Though many members believe this branch will fold following the arrest or capture of the last remaining slasher, for now the officers begrudgingly accept their help to save Hong Kong.

Status

Members of Nine Stars earn recognition by performing a service to their community. Exemplary deeds are also awarded with the gift of a star-shaped pin.

- You've saved a family's life from a slasher through your savvy investigation. You gain a free Skill Specialty in the Investigation or Occult Skill.
- You know success doesn't come from being a loose cannon, but from working together as a team. When you participate in a Tactic, your successes gain the 8-again quality.
- You're a founding member of Nine Stars, or you've reached the full nine stars on your lapel and just kept going. You gain the three-dot Trained Observer Merit, even if you don't meet the usual prerequisites.



VASCU

Quote: *“There is no mind we can’t unlock. No secret we can’t find.”*

The Vanguard Serial Crimes Unit (VASCU) discreetly serves an international portfolio of clients that includes a mixture of governmental bureaus, law-enforcement agencies, and wealthy magnates. Officially, VASCU’s specialists aid with the investigation and profiling of serial and spree killers on a freelance basis through a corporate front called the Vanguard Initiative; the Unit also produces reports and writes papers tracking rates of mass murders and violent crime on an international scale. Due to the dramatic rise in monster activity, VASCU has branched out to include hunting true monsters as well slashers.

Most of VASCU’s clients know their agents possess unusual talents — every operative is a psychic — and they specifically hire the conspiracy for this reason. Only certain retirees who once worked at the Federal Bureau of Investigation know the full truth, because they were part of VASCU’s creation and oversaw the group’s efforts through its final reorganization in 1982. For most of the 1980s, despite a dramatic rise in violent crimes, the FBI allowed VASCU to lead the charge, expecting their newly reconstructed arm to step up where other agents could not. For over 30 years, VASCU agents doggedly tracked serial killers and mass murderers all over the country, informing FBI agents when they could of a suspect’s hideout or a victim’s location. In fact, VASCU’s success rate was a little too high for some FBI agents, who began to distrust their psychic abilities and favor data, hard sciences, and cutting-edge technology instead of what some agents called “an artifact of the Cold War.”

Following yet another change in leadership, VASCU eventually lost enough funding it could no longer maintain its core function and was officially shut down in 2008. Then, a few years later, an anonymous private citizen broke ground on the Vanguard Institute in Philadelphia, collected what remained of VASCU’s agents and administration, and allowed them to move in and resume operations on a freelance basis. To date, rumor has it no one inside VASCU is certain who’s footing the bill for their expenses — which is extremely odd for a group that prides itself on its psychic abilities. Most members believe VASCU is being secretly funded by a bipartisan committee in Congress but is largely left alone to avoid undue scrutiny.

Using a bioengineering research group called the Vanguard Initiative as a front, VASCU remains headquartered in Philadelphia, and continues to work with US government interests as a contractor — including, upon occasion, with the few VASCU agents who remained in the FBI. However, as word of the institute’s talents worm their way through the dark underside of international law enforcement, VASCU increasingly sees profitable opportunities overseas.

VASCU psychics now operate on every continent, whether in long-term partnerships with law enforcement branches and wealthy private citizens, or short-term deployments for emergency situations. Thankfully, the group is profitable and can refuse services when required. Some VASCU agents are rumored to abandon their duties, however, and take on extra work themselves.

VASCU’s secret weapon is the Wintergreen Process, a drug-based therapy that inductees undergo in order to overclock the information-processing centers in the brain to preternatural heights. The process is dark fruit born from the sinister tree of the MK-ULTRA psychic research program run by the CIA, and VASCU’s possession of this classified information is one of the key sources of contention between them and FBI.

The Enemy

Much like its previous incarnations, VASCU is under attack. Someone — or something — fears its psychic agents and will stop at nothing to destroy the agency despite the fact that its existence is well-cloaked within the Vanguard Initiative. Reports of slasher attacks against agents and support staff, uncannily timed warnings to slashers, and political sabotage have forced VASCU agents to face the possibility they've been compromised. Worse, many VASCU agents are starting to think the only reason they're still around is because the FBI wants them to find Doctor Wintergreen, the missing pioneer who championed the Wintergreen Process.

Modern VASCU agents share a burden with their predecessors — their actions are restricted by the laws and regulations of the countries in which they operate. “I know he did it because I read his mind” won't pass as evidence in most courts. This fosters an atmosphere of cynicism mixed with frustration, as VASCU agents often believe themselves to be superior to other hunters. After all, they've managed to do what other conspiracies could not: tap into the power of the mind.

Of course, when it comes to dealing with monsters, the rules don't apply. New VASCU recruits are even taking their cues from other agencies such as Task Force: VALKYRIE or the Cheiron Group.

Hunters

You were part of VASCU before the conspiracy went freelance. So many dark secrets, so many cold truths you can't tell anyone after you signed all those ink-smeared documents. At the end of your first term of service, you signed on to work or you were packed off to the bright new Vanguard Institute, with its sterile Philadelphia headquarters and its new, international remit. You remember your old buddies in the FBI, though, and the price VASCU paid in blood, sweat, and tears.

The college recruiter had a funny look on her face when she read through your test results. Next thing you know, you were being offered a chance to join some hotshot bioengineering group with a serious pay package. Once you got to the Vanguard Institute, you were put through even weirder tests, and apparently, you're psychic. Things can't *possibly* get any stranger than this, right?

You're an angry ex-pat who left your country after losing everything you loved. It's a cold rage, burning in your guts, and it won't ever go away. You can't get them back, not after the killer finished with them. VASCU offered a way to take that fury and harness it, to steal something back from the killer and make it your own. You keep an eye on VASCU's reports to glean news from your homeland. One day, you're going to tear that bastard's mind apart, thought by agonizing thought.

A career in law enforcement left you disillusioned. It was corruption and brutality from top to bottom; you joined to serve and protect, and instead you found out that bad apples filled the whole fucking barrel. Thing is, you were a damn good investigator — so good that VASCU's recruiters were waiting to pounce when you handed in your notice to the police chief. Retirement's going to have to wait a little longer.

Departments

Most of VASCU's staff are professionals who are not gifted with psychic abilities. Candidates suitable for the Wintergreen Process are rare, and VASCU treats every agent as a valued asset.

By far the largest department is the **Operations Department**, consisting of agents deployed to clients in order to profile, investigate and, when necessary, aid in bringing down serial killers and slashers. Ops agents deal with the vicissitudes of the conspiracy's rather mercenary approach to clients, and sometimes compete with one another for the choicest assignments.

Agents are assigned to **Field Liaison** based on operational need or prior experience with the supernatural. This department deals with other organizations like its front, the Vanguard Institute. Liaison's agents build contact networks among other hunters to work with local cells in areas VASCU visits. These agents also trawl through such communities for potential recruits; the conspiracy is not above poaching conspirators suitable for the Wintergreen Process.

Finally, the innocuously named **Synergies & Market Growth Potential** takes up the darkest corner of VASCU's organizational chart. The name's just another veneer; this department is dedicated to exploiting psychic potential for more than just tracking down slashers in the wild. Synergies agents use their Teleinformatic Endowments to conduct industrial espionage, sway politicians, and dig out blackmail material VASCU can use to protect itself. The department justifies its operations through its outrageous claims: Plenty of inhuman monsters dwell in the upper echelons of government and corporate power, and until mortals are back in charge they'll do what it takes to stop them.

Status

Status in VASCU is earned when the conspiracy's goals are met. For the time being, the conspiracy is less concerned about personal glory and is more focused on bigger initiatives — at least until the Slasher epidemic ends.

- When you signed up for VASCU, you didn't know they'd run you through a series of tests for psychic aptitude you'd pass with flying colors. Your new job scares the shit out of you, but you *know* this is the best place for you to hunt. Gain a free psychic-related Skill Specialty in Occult.

- You've been doing this for a while. You've traveled the world, worked with law enforcement and investigators across the globe, and have seen how the horrors of human atrocities are repeated time and time again. You're hardened by what you've experienced, and you've earned respect among those who matter. You gain a bonus dot of the Status Merit with the government or law enforcement agency of your choice.

- Few hunters understand what it's like to get a bird's-eye view of the Vigil on a global scale. You've seen and stopped innumerable killers in more countries than you can count. You gain the Tactical Insight Merit, whether you would normally qualify for it or not. If you already have the Merit, you may reroll your dice pool when performing a Tactic once per session.

Teleinformatic Endowments

Teleinformatic Endowments are available to VASCU agents (p. XX) and may be selected during character creation. The Wintergreen Process is a free Endowment all agents receive, but it is their choice whether or not they want to go through it. It is, however, required if a VASCU agent wants to use Teleinformatic Endowments.

Wintergreen Process

Named after Dr. Barbara Wintergreen, this process uses a series of chemical and unconventional therapy techniques to unlock an agent's mind. Dr. Wintergreen's process is a refinement of methods used in the 50s and 60s for altering human mental patterns. Agents undergo an extensive process where they are injected with a series of psychoactive drugs from hallucinogens, growth hormones, dimethyltryptamine (DMT) with a heavily modified Harmala alkaloid, to other chemicals to spur a physiological change in their brain. This is followed with a number of therapy techniques used outside their intended purpose, such as EMDR, hypnosis, and ASMR sensitization. The unlikely result of these techniques is that the agent is able to "unlock" a part of her mind she could not access before, giving her access to Teleinformatic Endowments. Not every VASCU agent receives the drug therapy, but to use Teleinformatics, one must undergo the process.

When agents use their power, it is an act of will. Her mind goes into overload and it can sometimes cause damage, such as a nosebleed or headache, as her body tries to keep up with her mental capacity.

When purchasing a new Teleinformatic Endowment, the agent must go through another chemical process for the Endowment to take hold in the hunter's mind. VASCU administers the treatment to any agent in good standing, though the process generally takes a day in the labs to complete. At this time, it is not clear if the Wintergreen Process can be reversed, but agents suspect several attempts have been made. Agents who leave VASCU undergo monitoring and, as long as they don't use their abilities in an overt way, are often left to their own devices. Hunters who might pose a threat to others are not treated with such leniency and are instead returned to VASCU headquarters indefinitely.

Codex

A side effect of an increased mental capacity and processing power is the ability to remember literally anything an agent has ever read, and to recall, collate, and process that information at speeds of which most people could only dream. This doesn't just make recalling information easy, but it makes the hunter a hyper-effective researcher and investigator.

Cost: 1 point of lethal damage and 1 Willpower

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instant

Halve the time it takes for the agent to perform a single investigation or research action as she cross-references available information with information she has already read. Additionally, she achieves exceptional success on three successes instead of five successes when performing these actions.

Hall of Mirrors

The Hall of Mirrors is a mental meditation technique VASCU agents use to meditate on the future. These agents take what they know about a situation and meditate on it while viewing possible futures. While VASCU claims the Hall of Mirrors is not a physical place, but some a hallucination shared among all agents, many agents believe they go somewhere else when they do this meditation. They claim they don't just look inside themselves for answers but go to an actual place. There, they view the future through "looking portals" stationed throughout the hall.

The Hall of Mirrors shows probable futures — the most likely outcomes if nothing changes. Because the future is malleable by action, the Hall of Mirrors is unable to show anything more than a week into the future. Unfortunately, the experience is trying on operatives and visiting the hall causes them pain.

Cost: 1 point of lethal damage

Dice Pool: Wits + Occult

Action: Extended. Each roll represents 5 minutes spent meditating and searching in the Hall of Mirrors for a specific subject, such as a person or event. The meditation requires five successes to complete.

Success: The hunter advances toward finding information in the Hall of Mirrors. If the required number of successes is met, the character is successful.

Exceptional Success: The agent is so positively overwhelmed by visiting the Hall of Mirrors, they gain the Inspired Condition until the end of the session, may ask an additional question regarding the information they seek, and reduce the time between rolls by two minutes.

Failure: The agent fails to acquire information. She can abandon the attempt or continue in meditation but must gain the Spooked Condition.

Dramatic Failure: The agent gets too deep into her own mind and cannot reach the Hall of Mirrors. The attempt fails and she gains the Guilty Condition.

Upon completing the mediation, the player may ask the Storyteller a single question pertaining to her subject's future. This cannot be more than a week out, or the meditation fails. The question must pertain to the subject and be specific: "Will Marcel get the job he's interviewing for?" or "What does Janette plan to do tomorrow?" The Storyteller determines what is going to happen in the future and gives the player information, though it doesn't have to be perfectly detailed: "Marcel doesn't get the job, but he interviews elsewhere." or "Janette follows her daily routine without any changes." The hunter gains the Informed Condition about her subject.

Polygraph

Every investigator knows that sometimes suspects lie. VASCU agents can tune into the churning emotions of a target's thoughts and can draw the truth out from their treacherous emotions.

Cost: 1 point of lethal damage

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instant

Duration: One scene

The agent attunes herself to her subject, watching the rise and fall of emotions during the interrogation. For the rest of the scene, the player's rolls achieve exceptional success at three successes rather than five successes when dealing with the subject.

Postcognition

Some people have the ability to feel the psychic impressions left on an area, recalling emotional resonance and gathering clues about what happened. A well-trained VASCU agent can relive a crime scene as though she were the victim, taking what little she already knows and turning it into hard facts by extreme deductive reasoning. She can even will herself into seeing the crime as it happened through the victim's eyes.

The agent must be at the location the crime took place to use this power, she cannot simply look at pictures to recreate the crime. The psychic residue of a location touches the echoes of what has gone before. Unfortunately, this causes some agents to suffer due to the excruciating toll reliving traumatic events takes on their mind.

Cost: 1 point of lethal damage (and 1 Willpower, see below)

Dice Pool: Wits + Investigation – Time (see below)

Action: Instant

This power's roll is modified by how old the crime scene in question is: over a day old (–1), over a week old (–3), over a year old (–5)

Roll Results

Success: The agent concentrates on the crime on which she wants information as she activates this power. She gains a Clue per success on her activation roll, pertaining to this crime. If she spends a Willpower during activation, she may instead relive the last five minutes of the crime as though she were the victim. This nets the same number of Clues, but additionally gives her the Informed Condition about the crime for further investigation.

Exceptional Success: Additional successes are their own reward.

Failure: The agent is overwhelmed by the psychic impressions left in the area and she cannot make sense of the scene.

Dramatic Failure: The scene grips the agent. Though she cannot make heads nor tails of what is happening, its violence marks her. She suffers a breaking point.

Speed of Thought

Every VASCU agent needs an edge, but Speed of Thought gives them several. When active, the agent kicks their nervous system into overdrive, becoming hyperaware of the world around them. Details come through with crystal clarity and time itself almost seems to slow — though they're bound by physical limitations as they struggle to cope with the flood of information crashing into their mind.

Cost: 1 point of lethal damage

Dice Pool: None

Action: Reflexive

Duration: One scene

The agent may immediately move to the top of the Initiative order. Additionally, he may use the higher of his Wits or Dexterity to determine his Defense, rather than the lower.

Talon

The agent focuses their thoughts and feelings into a honed spike of anger, fear, and confusion. Then, the agent rams that psychic talon into the mind of a target, punching through their psyche in a disorientating surge of emotions.

Cost: 1 point of bashing damage

Dice Pool: Resolve + Intimidation vs. Composure

Action: Contested

Roll Results

Success: Through sheer force of will, the agent focuses on a single target to attack them with a toxic mix of emotions. The attack acts as a mental assault with a weapon rating of 2 bashing damage. A successful hit inflicts the Insane Tilt on the victim.

Exceptional Success: The agent inflicts the Insensate Tilt instead of Insane.

Failure: The hunter is unable to affect her target's emotional state.

Dramatic Failure: The agent's emotional spike rebounds and slams into her instead. She gains the Shaken Condition.

Tag

The agent can extend her senses into nearby cameras and through an unseen network to spy. The cameras do not need to be networked together for the hunter to utilize them; anything from a smartphone's camera to a CCTV camera works. She can even jump between cameras as long as they can see each other. The agent can co-opt the senses of simple animals, such as rodents or small birds, but nothing larger than that. This is a one-way viewing window — she can't command or direct animals to, say, follow her target.

Cost: 1 Willpower

Dice Pool: None

Action: Instant

Duration: One scene

The agent can send her sense into any nearby camera or small animal to begin spying. The agent can then follow the network to find her target instantly. Each viewing target (such as jumping from one camera to another or one animal to another) must be within line of sight of one another. The agent doesn't need to know where the next camera is, she just flows into it. She can watch her target for up to one scene. Her cell gains a +2 bonus to track the target or on investigation rolls regarding the target's location for the duration of this power. Additionally, the hunter gains the Informed Condition regarding her target once the scene is over.

Backlash: The hunter must concentrate to use this power. She suffers a -2 penalty to take any other action and cannot react to being surprised.