

NIGHT'S BLACK AGENTS

A **VAMPIRE SPY** THRILLER BY **KENNETH HITE**

Based on the GUMSHOE
system by **Robin D. Laws**



Sample file

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KENNETH HITE

BASED ON THE GUMSHOE SYSTEM BY ROBIN D. LAWS

GOOD THINGS OF DAY BEGIN TO DROOP AND DROUSE,

WHILE NIGHT'S BLACK AGENTS TO THEIR PREY DO ROUSE.

-MACBETH, ACT III, SCENE II

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THE COLD WAR?
OVER.
THE WAR ON TERROR?
OVER FOR YOU.

You used to uncover secrets, or maybe kill to keep them. You used to serve your country in the shadows, doing things — or stopping things — that couldn't be shown in daylight or on the evening news.

Then you stopped. Maybe you got tired, or maybe you got burned, or maybe you got out while you could.

But you didn't go into the daylight. Not just yet. You stayed in the shadows, in Europe's deniable underground networks of crime and conflict, but you did it on your terms. You did a few ops, and you asked fewer questions. You worked for money in secret accounts, and for people you didn't know.

But they weren't people. It turned out they couldn't be shown in daylight or on the evening news either. Because they were vampires.

And now you know. And they know that you know.

Vampires exist. What can they do? Who do they own? Where is safe? How much is legend, and what is the truth? You don't know those answers yet. So you'd better start asking questions and picking targets. You have to trace the bloodsuckers' operations, penetrate their networks, follow their trail, and target their weak points. Because if you don't hunt them, they will hunt you. And they will kill you.

Or worse.

You must mount your own shadow war, on a secret terror that only you know exists. Stay alert, and stay awake. It's going to be a long night.

INTRODUCTION

TELLS

IN POKER, TELLS ARE THOSE LITTLE GESTURES or changes of expression that tell what's in your hand. This is where I tell what's in your hands.

This game, *Night's Black Agents*, adapts the GUMSHOE engine to the propulsive paranoia of the spy thriller genre: not just James Bond, but also and especially films like *Ronin* and the *Bourne* trilogy. You build agents worthy of such films; tough, resourceful, clever, deadly — in a word, badass. Then you send them to kill vampires.

The Director (who plays the role usually called the DM or the GM in other RPGs), begins by building the vampires. In *Night's Black Agents*, the vampires and their conspiracy are modular, customizable. In one Director's world, they might fear garlic and crosses — in another Director's campaign, they might be spider-like aliens who move through hyperspace. Or both. Likewise, the Director builds the enemy network — the people and groups the vampires

have already turned to their ends — to her own specifications.

Then the Director sends the vampires, and their own agents, and their pawns and tools and ghouls and monsters, to kill you. The goal — both yours and the Director's — is action, and horror, and the special thrills that only spy stories can deliver.

Throughout a typical *Night's Black Agents* campaign, the agents:

- Uncover the extent of the vampire conspiracy, mapping its branches and personnel
- Survive attacks by the vampires or their minions and pawns
- Discover the vampires' weaknesses and true nature
- Detect and prevent ongoing and ad hoc vampire or conspiratorial operations
- Weaken the vampire conspiracy by striking at its main branches or key personnel
- Finally, destroy the vampires at the heart of the conspiracy

Any of these goals might provide the direction, the spine, the through-line, of a scenario or adventure, usually referred to in this game as an "operation." One operation may take many sessions of game play; 2 or 3 sessions per scenario is normal.

The Director, meanwhile, plots out the structure of the vampire conspiracy, and plans both active and reactive operations to test the agents and reveal the plot. "Active" operations are the ones where the agents are moving forward against the vampires: investigating their conspiracy, thwarting its goals, and attacking it. "Reactive" operations are the ones where the vampires are moving forward: attacking some other group, infiltrating some new city, or hunting the agents directly.

Either way, the Director maps out a structure for the operation: What is the agents' (or opposition's) goal, and what is the adventure's spine? What tips the agents off to an opportunity or a threat? What information is available, and where or from whom can the agents

get it? What assets does the opposition have in position? What is the end game — what happens if the agents uncover the truth in Venice, or if the vampires succeed in Helsinki?

FROM STRUCTURE TO STORY

The Director's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the players, bring the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters interact with locations, gathering physical evidence or facts on the ground, and with supporting characters run by the Director, getting actionable intel or inside information.

The first scene drops a lead and asks a question: How can we hurt the vampires here? What are the vampires planning here? You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you more about the op. Each scene contains clues; intel or information pointing to a new scene. To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

Certain scenes may put a new twist on the operation, as the initial lead turns out to reveal a much bigger challenge, or to be a trap luring your agents into ambush. Other scenes may test your agents' speed, stamina, or savagery, making them pay a price in blood to move forward.

As clues accumulate, a picture of the operation emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the opposition confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success — or, in rare instances, failure. Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.

CHAPTERS

This book breaks down as follows:

Characters gives you the tools to build your agent, including his badass abilities, his shadowy background, and his classified dossier. You can also select



Drives to push him forward, and build Trust with his teammates.

Rules lays out the GUMSHOE system of tests, spends, and contests. Special thriller rules for chases and combat, special horror rules for madness and paranoia, and special rules for bringing the Heat, add to the solid basics of investigation and action. If you survive, you might even get better at them.

Tools gives your agents some useful weapons, spy tech, gear, vehicles, and tactics to help them survive.

Vampires gives the Director the components to build her own personal horrors, from Serbian legend or Stoker's novel, from film or folklore or fiction. Then it helps the Director build out the conspiracy, and adds some supernatural backup to the main event. Plentiful worked examples can fuel the imagination, or get dropped into the action ready to kill.

Cities lays out the shadowy world of European crime, espionage, and terrorism. Then it helps the Director fill it up with vampires. Three sample cities get a quick briefing; Marseille gets built out and clotted with menace.

Stories guides the Director through plotting active or reactive operations,

running the game, and rolling with the players' creativity. The Vampyrism gives her a robust way to plot enemy responses in dramatic fashion. Finally, it lays out some alternative approaches to the game: take out the vampires, put in Cthulhu, or give the agents some paranormal juice of their own.

(S)Entries starts your campaign with a sample operation, as things go horribly wrong in Bosnia and your agents discover the existence of vampires. Worse, vampires discover the existence of your agents.

Sources tells you what I read and watched to write and run this game, and gives you some leads to follow on your own.

Finally, **Addenda** brings together cheat sheets for the rules, character sheets for your agents, and plenty of other tools to put everyone on the same page.

MODES

Night's Black Agents is "a vampire spy thriller." That means its default setting is a world of horror and shadows, with flashes of action. Its upbeat lands on the thrills and the flavor, with espionage and problem-solving on the downbeat to set up the action.

Not every spy thriller is the same. Some deal in black and white morality, others in shades of gray self-loathing. Some chart emotional damage more intently than they do bullet trajectories. Others try to mess with your mind, and let your adrenal glands take care of themselves. They play in different idioms, styles, or modes. Many spy stories, especially series like the Bond novels and films, TV shows like *Alias* or *MI-5*, or the *Queen and Country* comics, switch between modes depending on the demands of the individual story. Others, like John Le Carré's Smiley novels or the *Bourne* trilogy of films, stick to one mode and deepen it throughout.


For those who wish to emphasize one or another idiom, we break out a few possible modes of play and indicated those rules and game elements most suited for them with specific icons and options. Combine these modes in any pattern the players desire; some rules (such as Sources of Stability) work with almost all modes. The Director may decide that some rules and elements are simply not allowed in her game in order to inculcate a specific flavor of spy thriller, which is after all the entire point.

BURN

Some spy stories privilege psychological damage and the cost of heroism: the Bourne trilogy of films, the TV series *Alias* and *Callan*, and the espionage novels of Graham Greene, for example. Horrors drain your soul as much as they do your blood; you look into the abyss and see the abyss welcoming you in.

In BURN mode games, psychological damage is more intense; the actions

agents must take inevitably burn away their humanity. Your Stability is capped at 12, and degrades faster. Killing is never easy, and never free.

Look for the BURN icon  in these rules for specifics.

DUST

The default setting of *Night's Black Agents* is a cinematic thriller. To instead recreate the gritty, lo-fi espionage world of Anthony Price or Charles McCarry, similar to the TV series *The Sandbaggers* or *Rubicon*, or films like *Three Days of the Condor*, you can “de-power” the game into DUST mode by:

- removing the MOS rules
- removing the cherries for ratings of 8+ in most General abilities
- capping Health at 10
- restricting the Thriller Combat rules or eliminating them entirely

Look for the DUST icon  in those sections and elsewhere for specifics.

Most DUST mode media incorporates at least two of MIRROR, BURN, and STAKES as well, but there's nothing forcing you to do so.

In DUST mode, the vampires and their agents will be far more challenging and powerful in open combat. Design, and encourage your players to design, operations that avoid shootouts unless the team has an overwhelming positional advantage, or some surprising ace in the hole.

MIRROR

Many spy stories, especially in the modern era, present a “wilderness of mirrors,” a world of hidden agendas

and shifting allegiances. They threaten personal identity and self-knowledge, mirroring those threats in betrayal and contests between corrupt opponents where the protagonist must trust only his own moral sense — if he can remember it. This is the world of John Le Carré's Smiley novels and Barry Eisler's John Rain thrillers, of movies like *Ronin* and *Spy Games* and the *Mission: Impossible* films, of TV shows like *The Prisoner* and *MI-5*.


In MIRROR mode games, your contacts and even your team are unreliable; your partners can help you with Trust, or destroy you with Betrayal. Unlike the other modes, MIRROR mode games encourage player vs. player story lines or active conflict.

Look for the MIRROR icon  in these rules for specifics.


STAKES

Although more common in earlier spy fiction than now, some spy stories play for higher stakes. The characters derive their actions from a higher purpose than mere survival or “get the job done” ethics: patriotism, the search for knowledge, protection of the innocent, or even justified revenge. This is the world of James Bond and Jack Ryan, of Tim Powers' novel *Declare*, of films like *Taken*, of TV shows like *Burn Notice*.

In STAKES mode games, your agents have Drives that urge them forward; this rule is highly recommended for games in any mode. In BURN mode, Drives can force the characters to sacrifice themselves; in MIRROR mode, conflicting agendas can escalate the drama. Even DUST mode agents often aim higher than just getting out from under the looming threat.

Look for the STAKES icon  in these rules for specifics.

DVD COMMENTARY

Most of the sidebars in this book give optional rules, handy lists, or other game material. Sidebars with the  icon are different: think of them as the “DVD commentary track” on the game. They provide advice, hints, and tricks. Many of

them come from alpha playtester Josh, whose agent Sam Vornau bled and suffered over many months of play to learn them. Others come from players and Directors of the pre-order edition: John Adamus, John Anderson, Kevin Kulp, and Simon Rogers.