

H. P Lovecraft
1890-1937

The Keeper's Companion

Blasphemous Knowledge, Forbidden Secrets,
and Handy Information

A Core Book for Keepers, Vol. 1

by Keith Herber, William Dietze, Brian M. Sammons,
Charles P. Zaglanis, Lynn Willis, Sandy Petersen,
Kevin Ross, Scott Aniolowski, Sam Johnson, Stacy Clark,
Peter Jeffrey, Lucia Szachnowski, John B. Monroe,
Bruce Ballon, and Davide Gallorini

Cover Art by Paul Carrick

Interior Art by Drashi Khendup, Earl Geier,
Tom Sullivan, Dreyfus, Lisa A. Free,
Jason Eckhardt, and Paul Carrick

PROJECT AND EDITORIAL BY LYNN WILLIS AND DAVID MITCHELL

INTERIOR LAYOUT BY DAVID MITCHELL

Cover Layout by Charlie Krank

Copyreading by David Mitchell



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Clear Credit

About a quarter of this book was originally published as the *Keeper's Compendium*, a previous Chaosium book which has been out of print since 1996. Five articles have seen previous publication: "Alien Races," "Forbidden Books," "Mysterious Places" and "Secret Cults" comprised the whole of the *Keeper's Compendium*. "Ten Commandments of Cthulhu Hunting" appeared in the *Cthulhu Casebook*. Skills are pro tem. The investigator sheet is a modified version of the 1920s investigator sheet appearing in the *Call of Cthulhu* edition 5.6 rules. All other articles and features are original to this book.

The chapters "Alien Races," "Forbidden Books," "Mysterious Places" and "Secret Cults" were written by Keith Herber, based on creations by H. P. Lovecraft and divers hands. Daniel Harms corrected, expanded, and updated this material. Other contributors include Scott Aniolowski, for the insects from Shaggai in "Alien Races"; Brian M. Sammons (with Bruce Ballon) for the Shining Trapezohedron and the Haunter of the Dark; Stacy Clark and Peter Jeffrey, for the "More Mythos Tomes" sidebar; Brian M. Sammons for "Suggestions for Keepers"; William Dietze for "Forensic Medicine"; Davide Gallorini, for "An Alternate Resistance Table"; Daniel Harms, for substantial additions to "A Brief History of the Written Word," "Forbidden Books," and "Languages and Scripts"; Sam Johnson for "Books and Sanity: Alternate Rules"; Sandy

Petersen and John B. Monroe for "Good Cthulhu Hunting"; Kevin Ross, for checking facts and dates in "Forbidden Books", and for providing corrections when needed; Brian Sammons, for "Arcane Antiquities" and "Suggestions for Keepers"; Lucya Szachnowski for the Horniman Museum sidebar in "Secret Cults"; Lynn Willis for the "Feverish Study" and "Brainstorming" sidebars; Charles P. Zaglanis for "Occult Books"; and Lynn Willis for the update and expansion of the *Call of Cthulhu* skills. Thanks to the National Center for Health Sciences (NCHS) for the "Circumstances of Death by State" table in "Forensic Medicine". Thanks also to the St. Louis County Medical Examiner's Office for the death investigation form on page 207.

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GOOD CTHULHU HUNTING

The Ten Commandments of Successful Mythos Investigations; or, How to Come Back Alive.

by Sandy Petersen and John B. Monroe.



Call of Cthulhu investigators have an average life span only half that of the nation at large. Their careers are short because many of them don't begin exploring the mythos until later in life, and then those developing careers are abbreviated as the result of psychological casualties or death by misadventure. Such deaths are largely preventable by following some simple rules.

1) KEEP IT SECRET

"Opinions were divided as to notifying the Massachusetts State Police, and the negative finally won."
H. P. Lovecraft, "The Dunwich Horror."

The most deadly threat posed by the Cthulhu Mythos is knowledge of its arcane science, creatures, and locales. Always remain close-mouthed about your activities. It's often better not to bother with a cover story, since professional seekers-after-truth make indifferent liars.

In general, authorities should not be notified of a Cthulhoid menace's presence unless catastrophe looms. Police, federal agents, and the National Guard are unprepared to deal with the preternatural, and their participation in a dangerous investigation is rarely helpful. Secretiveness is not for selfish purposes—it can save lives. The same applies to local help, who must often be hired to complete an investigation. Of course, secrecy can be carried too far—a man who has lost a family member to a Cthulhu monster has earned the right to know the truth.

Another reason for sealed lips is preventative. Widespread knowledge of paranormal techniques would change our world irrevocably. A crackpot with a grudge could whistle up Azathoth and wipe out a state. To obtain Glaaki's hideous reward of near-immortality, hundreds of terminally-diseased folk might flock to join his service. A misguided government agency might attempt to utilize Ghatanothoa as a military asset. Worse scenarios are easy to imagine. Some scholars also believe that many authorities may be pawns of the foul Cthulhoid monsters such as the mi-go, etc., and are not trustworthy.

By confining knowledge of arcane horrors, a handful of dedicated scholars can work to avoid the worst horrors, advance the cause of science, and protect not only humanity but also the dreams of humanity.

2) STAY TOGETHER

"Even though you're a vampire,
you're still my brother."
The Lost Boys.

This tidbit of advice is two-part: first, never operate alone if you can possibly avoid it; second, stick with your partners.

While many great Mythos discoveries have been made by intrepid explorers working alone, it is equally true that most of these solitary scholars subsequently came to bad ends. Emulate their skills and their values, not their solitude.

Peter Dannseys, the noted metaphysician, gives a cautionary account of the parapsychologist L. Svedin who, with several aides, ended his career while investigating cattle mutilations. Correctly suspecting a nearby mineshaft, Svedin sent a hired hand into the shaft while he and the others performed a bovine autopsy. When the hired man did not return, he sent two aides after the man. They, in turn, vanished. Svedin sent a dozen men into the shaft in twos and threes before plunging in with the rest of his team, never to be seen again.

Some years later, Dr. Dannseys discovered that the mineshaft housed a rather nasty parasitic being. The shaft originally held only a single parasite, who captured the hired hand and transformed him into a being like itself. When Svedin sent in his aides, the parasites transformed them as well. When Svedin finally braved the shaft with his remaining investigators, nearly twenty parasites awaited him. If Svedin had initially penetrated the cave in force, he would have easily overpowered the parasite. By frittering away his strength, he became an accomplice to a great tragedy in parapsychological history.

3) ACT IN HASTE, REPENT AT LEISURE

“Then we’ll turn it up hotter
and burn up the ashes.”
Return of the Living Dead.

Enormous grief stems from the crime of acting before thinking. In one case a team discovered that an enormous clay plaque was connected with a particularly obnoxious manifestation of Nyarlathotep. Suddenly confronted by a hissing swarm of supernatural locusts, they instinctively reacted by shattering the plaque. Alas, the plaque actually held the chant for dismissing the aforementioned manifestation. Shattering it eliminated all hope. The entire team was killed or hospitalized, and the manifestation continues to this day. Anyone knowing of a 12th Dynasty spell for the dismissal of the Bringer of Pests is invited to contact Dr. Ratsegg c/o the Department of Oriental Antiquities at Miskatonic University.

Such tales should give pause. Before doing something irrevocable, make sure you have no other choice.

4) ALWAYS HAVE A PLAN

“... Lancelot, Galahad, and I leap out of the rabbit. ...”
Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Even a bad plan is better than no plan at all. While a bad plan may get everyone killed or turned insane, the lack of a plan always will. In contrast, Mythos monsters usually operate with very clear goals.

In one sad case, a group of scholars accidentally created a dimensional Gate to a hideous alien reality. One of the scholars entered the Gate without any plan of return. Presumably he’s there yet. His friends wish him luck, and periodically send sandwiches and beer through the Gate, hoping that they reach him. Somehow.

When investigating a Cthulhoid manifestation, every member of the team should have a clear idea of what will be expected of him during the investigation. If possible, a backup plan should also be available. Have an idea of what to do if the only members with guns disappear. If one member of the team is especially important to the success of the investigation, make sure he is safe at all times—don’t leave him alone in the cellar, don’t take a nap while he reads some strange awful book, and don’t let him experiment with strange talismans alone.

5) SCOUT IT OUT

“Does this house have a basement?”
Re Animator.

Before risking an encounter, make sure someone has scouted the area. This need not take the form of sending in commandos; doing a bit of research into local history can be quite effective. Careful survey of all the evidence is vital. Remember: knowledge is power.

One of the surest ways to be killed by monsters is to run into their lair with no information about possible escapes, numbers of monsters, and other such vital knowledge.

6) GUNS ARE A LAST RESORT

“What’re we supposed to use, harsh language?”
Aliens.

A firearm is a useful tool, handy in opening jammed locks, an excellent way to signal a comrade, and able to attract the attention of local authorities. When confronted with unruly locals, nonchalant display of a firearm can often effect quick cooperation. A gun has a wide assortment of uses. No investigative team should be without one.





Many investigators mistakenly assume that guns can defend against preternatural entities. This is a serious error. Firearms are designed to kill or wound humans and other native Earth life. No reasonable person would expect much effect against entities from other worlds, other realities, or other geologic time periods.

Undisciplined use of guns as weapons leads to unfortunate accidents, an unscientific regard for violence as the answer to problems, and even to possible jail terms. A gun should be the last resort of the successful investigator.

7) KNOW YOUR ENEMY

"I want to measure the bite marks. Maybe we can find out what we're dealing with here."

Creepshow.

Use all forms of media as research tools. Books, movies, and television news can all give clues and information about the weaknesses, powers, and whereabouts of the enemy. Know the sign of the vampire, the werewolf, the deep one hybrid, and others.

At the same time, do not expect that something which worked on the late show will work against Cthulhoid monsters. Always keep an open mind with regards to the Mythos.

8) THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM

"I never drink . . . wine."

Dracula.

Some entities are not distinguishable as powerful monsters, or even as monsters at all. Is that three-foot-tall insectoid really an avatar of Nyarlathotep? Is your next door neighbor who spends so much time in his swimming pool actually a deep one? When dealing with the Mythos, assume that what you encounter is powerful. That's just playing it safe and smart.

Keep your eyes and ears open. Ronno Meeb relates a time when a friend he thought dead came knocking at his door. Some of his companions were overjoyed at seeing the friend again and invited him inside. When he claimed that he was thirsty, Professor Meeb responded slyly, "How about your favorite, an ice-cold glass of turpentine?" When he responded that turpentine would be delicious, the rest of the group pulled out guns and blew him to pieces. The fluid flowing from his veins was, luckily, fluorescent yellow, not red.

Many monsters are expert at fitting into human society. Beware especially the effect that Mythos monsters can have on their weak-minded human servants. Almost anyone could be a worshiper of the Great Old Ones.

9) NEVER GIVE UP

"Sometimes on the very brink of certainty, I failed; yet still I clung to the hope which the next day or the next hour might realize."

Mary Shelley, Frankenstein.

Inexperienced investigators commonly give up when it appears that victory is impossible. Dedicated scholars never cease action, no matter how hopeless matters seem.

Never overlook the obvious; recheck your data; do more research. If things still look bleak, try random approaches to defeating the menace. No matter how bad it seems, it can get much worse if you give up. Don't go poking sticks into wasps' nests unless you are prepared to finish the job.

Our brothers and sisters in arms are all that stand between Earth and the sinister designs of the Cthulhu Mythos. Take heart in the fact that the perils and sacrifices of today may make a better world for future generations of the human race!

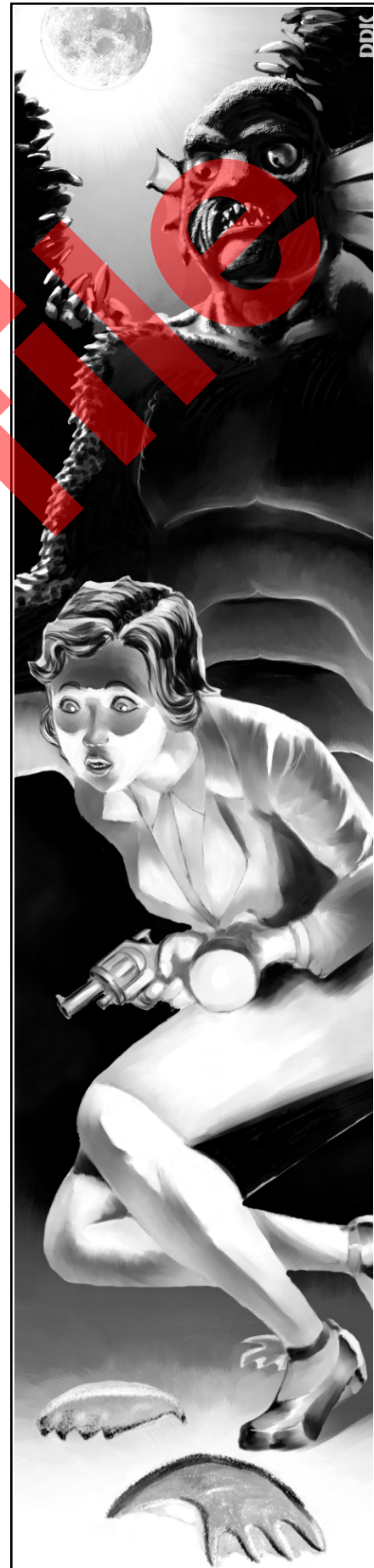
10) BE PREPARED

“Normal folks, they don’t spit up
bullets when you shoot ‘em!”

Near Dark.

This goes much further than just bringing along extra rope when spelunking. Before starting an expedition, do research on the subject. Find out any legends about the area which may give helpful clues. With access to ancient tomes of magical spells, a particular cantrip may be useful in your investigation. When reading to learn how to confront a beastly, consider the hardware needed. Take anything which sounds even remotely useful, but does not burden or impede movement.

In most cases, assume that you can never have enough stuff. Who knows what might come in handy when facing the Mythos? ■





SUGGESTIONS FOR KEEPERS

Thirteen Ways to Improve Your Game.

by Brian M. Sammons.



Whether you are a new *Call of Cthulhu* keeper or a battle-scarred veteran of many campaigns, still able to relate a Sanity-draining tale while grinning mischievously, your skill in the fine art of being a keeper can always be honed a little sharper. Below are, appropriately enough, thirteen bloody bits of advice from a varied group of cultists I mean fans of *Call of Cthulhu*. Their suggestions can increase the enjoyment of your *Cthulhu* games for your players and for yourself.

Five Cthulhu cultists shared their advice with me and thus are able to help mold (or is that rot?) the minds of countless keepers in the years to come. Thanks again! Those shadowy presences behind the scenes are Peter Devlin, Sam Johnson, Davide Mana, Phil Posehn, and Charles Zaglanis.

1) KNOW YOUR PLAYERS AND THEIR INVESTIGATORS

To understand your players is to understand their characters, for player characters are usually extensions of player personalities. Unless all the players in your group are naturally gifted actors, it is hard for them to give themselves over completely to the roles they play in the game. This is not a bad thing. It is human nature, and actually represents a useful tool for the keeper. When you understand what motivates your players, what they like or don't like in their games, and what buttons to push to get them to act, your job as a keeper becomes much easier. A player who enjoys daring, fast-paced adventures will be disappointed if his characters don't see action. The person who prefers investigative roleplaying will be upset if it's non-stop action. Would-be thespians want to have memorable interaction with other characters and a chance to ham it up a little. Those who play *Call of Cthulhu* because of the horror aspects of the game will want to be placed in situations ensuring maximum fright. Evoking all these elements in a single session is hard to do, but hey, no one ever said being a keeper was easy.

Roleplayers often respond more strongly to personally-targeted plot hooks than to character-targeted hooks. Build their interest quickly. Non-action-oriented players are well-suited to having their characters be the initial focus of the investigation. Give them a mystery to solve and some people to talk to, and they will drag the other players into the scenario. For those who crave action, start off the game with a bang. If you can scare them, they're sure to come looking for more.

Besides knowing the players, the characters they are playing also should be well known to the keeper and to the players themselves. One way to do this is to have the players write brief biographies for their investigators. What do they believe in? Do they have families? What were their childhoods like? What scares them? This knowledge will help you in several ways. First, it can help the players to define their characters. Second, it allows you to work an investigator's background into the plot of an ongoing campaign. Lastly, it may tell you even before the game starts who your best role players are likely to be. When a crucial point comes along in the campaign, make sure that at least one player who wrote a rich and detailed character history is involved. You are apt to get much better drama by doing this.

2) BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE MYTHOS

All keepers should know as much as possible about the Cthulhu Mythos before running *Call of Cthulhu*. This is because many of the game's central themes, including the creatures, alien gods, mysterious places, alternate dimensions, magic, cults, and the idea that reality itself is not what it appears to be can be difficult for a keeper to grasp. Luckily, *Cthulhu* has a long and thorough history behind it. All the information a keeper could ever want is readily available in one story or another, so why not use this literary legacy?

Before starting a campaign, the keeper should read as many H. P. Lovecraft stories as possible to get a sense of the mood and style those frightening tales convey so well. Besides providing a feel for the game's proper atmosphere, these stories also contain great information on specific aspects of the Mythos. In addition to Lovecraft, many other fine authors also wrote such stories, not only helping to better define the existing material but adding their own spin on things and greatly expanding the Mythos. Such famous writers as Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, Robert E. Howard, and Brian Lumley have contributed to the collective horror that is the Cthulhu Mythos.

Once you start running *Call of Cthulhu*, don't stop reading the fiction on which the game is based. Every time you plan to use some aspect of the Mythos you have never dealt with before, try to find out what stories it's mentioned in and read them. Most Mythos stories are fairly short, so by investing an hour or two you can greatly increase your knowledge about

the creature, tome, artifact, or whatever, and be better able to present such things in the game. A good keeper never stops reading and increasing his knowledge of the Mythos, despite the Sanity draining effect it may have on him. Sometimes one must suffer for one's art.

3) BE PREPARED FOR THE ADVENTURE

Once you've read the stories, shape that knowledge into an adventure for your players. When doing this, the more completely you prepare for the adventure, the better it will be for everyone involved. A good keeper has all relevant scenario information at hand and a good idea of how the session will play out. To this end, take notes as you prepare. List the important things that have to happen during the adventure. Keep in mind what things are happening behind the scenes to benefit or hinder the players. Know where to find important information.

Inadequate preparation is the quickest route to a poor *CoC* session. When the narrative is interrupted by searches for character stats, a plot synopsis, player handouts, maps, or other data, it is hard to hold on to the mood you were trying so hard to convey. Players usually can tell when a keeper hasn't prepared adequately. It is insulting to players to ask them to give up their free time to roleplay and then have them drumming their fingers as the keeper looks up something he overlooked or, worse yet, has to back-track the story because he forgot an important clue or event.

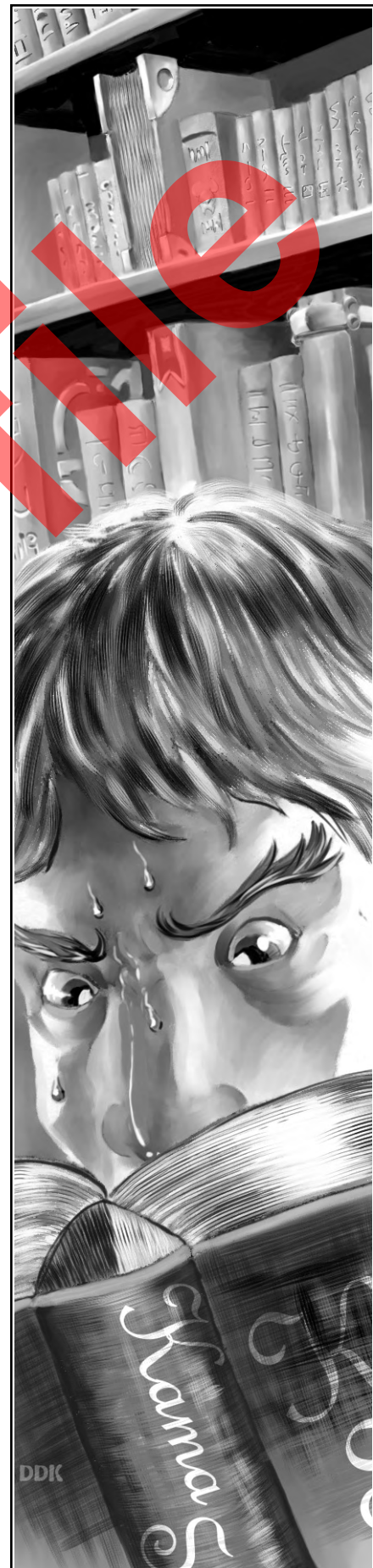
Some experienced keepers claim to be able to wing it, that is, run a scenario on the fly with little or no preparation. This is a scary task and one ripe for failure, especially when you consider that *Call of Cthulhu* is all about the history and mystery of the adventure. Trying to remember all that while focusing on what's happening to the players is an arduous task indeed. As we'll discuss later, there will come a time when the players deviate from the planned events of the adventure; then, as the keeper, you have no choice but to wing it. Try to keep this to a minimum. Good preparation makes for a confident keeper, a person whom the players can trust to provide entertainment and render fair judgment during a session.

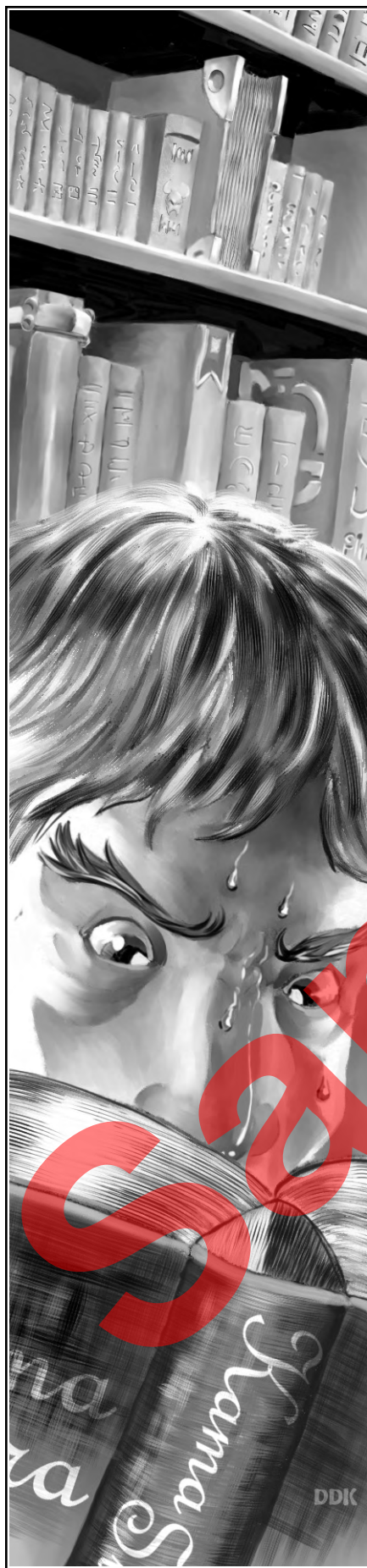
4) SET THE MOOD

Whenever possible, the keeper should try to establish an atmosphere conducive to fear. While this isn't always practical, many have found that *Call of Cthulhu* is best played in a darkened room, perhaps with candlelight or other forms of low lighting. The less the players see of the real world around them, the more they'll focus on the world you're creating for them. Don't be afraid to use sound effects either, such as scraping your fingernails across the table to simulate something clawing at a player's door during their stay in a haunted house. Try suddenly striking the table with a block of wood to mimic an unexpected gun shot that should make some of your players jump. Background music is always strongly suggested as it filters out everyday noises while setting its own mood. Music can range from swinging jazz when the investigators are in a speakeasy to somber haunting melodies as they explore a frightening place. Movie soundtracks are a great source for this kind of thing.

One of the easiest ways to bring the players deeper into the game world is through props and handouts. *Call of Cthulhu* was one of the first games to employ player handouts; they're creative, informative, and just plain fun. If the keeper has the time and resources, he or she should try to reproduce such handouts to make them look as authentic as possible. Don't just photocopy a page of the cultist's journal from the scenario, but try writing it out on an odd bit of paper, in an eccentric style. If the book it was found in was old, dirty, and water-damaged, try crinkling up the paper, smearing it with dirt, tearing it a little, adding a little water, etc., and remember that a handout does not just mean letters and diary pages. Old keys, coins, symbols, books, a peculiar rock, a wallet, old photographs, basically anything that can be given to the players for them to handle and study in the real world will make them feel closer to the story you're trying to tell.

One last trick in establishing a mood of fear is the use of private notes. If you have a group of investigators in an adventure and you decide that only one of them sees,





hears, senses, etc., something strange, then hand him or her a note saying what it was. (This is also good to do when a nervous character thinks he or she saw something, but in fact nothing was there at all.) If a person becomes the target of a spell or even of spiritual possession, handing over an innocent little note is much better than saying out loud in front of everyone what is happening or stopping the game to be alone with that person.

Another nasty trick is to give someone a note basically saying, "Roll POW. Did you make it?" and have the player hand the note back to you. Look at the note, smile, and scribble something down behind your keeper's screen, even if there was no reason for him or her to make a POW roll. The player will go nuts wondering what is happening to his or her investigator. So will everyone else who saw the note being passed out but doesn't know what it said. Little things like "You felt a cold chill run down your spine" or "You notice the mud in this area has a strange smell" relate normal everyday occurrences. But, since you took the time to write it on a note, the player you gave it to is likely to attach a sinister meaning to it.

Finally, while any and all of these suggestions on mood-setting are good, and they should enhance your gaming experience to some degree or another, if they are overused they lose their effectiveness and might even produce an outcome opposite to what you desired. Background music shouldn't be so loud that it distracts the players. Hitting them with a box full of props at one time is too much. Rewriting a complete Mythos tome to give to your players goes way beyond the call of duty. And if you pass around more notes than your local post office, the notes too will lose their fearful effect. Remember, everything in moderation.

5) MAKE BELIEVABLE AND MEMORABLE KEEPER CHARACTERS

Call of Cthulhu is a game of social interaction, even more so than other roleplaying games. In *CoC*, a good portion of the adventure should be spent investigating the mystery at hand. Most of the time this is accomplished by interviewing people or reading about a person's history. With all the time the players are going to spend dealing with the various characters, either directly or indirectly, it only makes sense that the keeper should make his or her characters as well rounded and as well thought out as possible. This can usually be done by remembering two simple rules when creating non-player characters to use in your adventure: have good motives for your characters, and make them memorable when you play them.

As a keeper you must grasp what the people your players interact with are capable of. A police detective might be willing to go to any lengths to arrest a suspect, even if it means breaking the law. A priest might not wish to go against the will of his church even to do something he knows is right. A cultist willing to summon a hunting horror to harass the investigators may not want to take the risk of summoning something more powerful, even if the spell is available for use. Most keepers will notice this when creating the character. One way to generate the idea is to write a brief history for the character, for the keeper's eyes only. An example of this could answer a lot of questions about the ever present Cthulhu cultist. Does the cultist believe that Cthulhu is the One True God or does he follow the Great Old One in hopes of personal gain? Does the cultist come from a family of Cthulhu worshipers or was he slowly seduced into worshipping Cthulhu after reading about the Master of R'lyeh in eldritch tomes? Is the cultist rotten to the core or is there a shred of decency buried deep within him? People don't just wake up one morning and say, "I think I'm going to start worshipping an evil, alien god today."

Once your characters have motives behind their actions, a keeper must then bring these people to life during the adventure. One of the most common failings of even experienced keepers is that they forget that they must actually roleplay their characters. Too often the keeper plays out a character as a lifeless information-supplying drone, or a one-dimensional stereotype who is subordinate to the adventure's plot. This can cause a major problem since the keeper sets the tone for the game. If the

keeper cannot be bothered to roleplay his characters, why then should the players make any real effort to roleplay?

As a keeper you should not be afraid to ham it up a little. Make notes about any physical or mental quirks the character is likely to demonstrate. Does this person have a nervous twitch, smell funny, limp, or speak with a nasal voice? Act out what you can (poorly if need be) and vividly describe the rest. Since roleplaying is largely an oral art, one of the easiest ways to make characters stand out is the use of voice characterization. Vary the pitch of your voice for different moods. Use regional dialects, foreign accents, or slang. Unique mannerisms, such as talking very slowly or having a stutter or a lisp also work well. After a while acting out your characters becomes second nature and, as an added bonus, it helps your players get into their own roleplaying because it sets the proper example.

6) BE TOUGH BUT FAIR

As keeper, you are the ultimate judge of every action and event that happens in the game. Not everyone is up to the task. Sometimes being fair can be hard, especially if you have to rule against a friend. Being tough but fair can cover a lot of ground, but two situations always stand out and seem to give new keepers the most trouble.

The first is, "Thou shalt kill an investigator when necessary." Remember, this is a game about horror, so the threat of death (or worse) hangs over the heads of the investigators whenever they delve into the mysteries of the universe. This not only instills a sense of fear, but stays true to Lovecraft's view of the Mythos. Fear of dying discourages the superhero mentality that some other roleplaying games breed into players via their message of "You can kill anything in a fight." This is not true of the monsters of the Mythos, nor should it ever be. While some adversaries the investigators face can be dealt with via brute force, others are so deadly that even the heaviest firepower only makes them mad. This is good, for it underlines H. P. Lovecraft's central theme that humanity is largely insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Also, by not being able to kill every threat they come across, the investigators are required to come up with more creative solutions to their problems. However, it should be restated that a keeper should only kill an investigator when necessary. Give them every chance to survive and any lucky break you can think of without compromising the integrity of your game or making it appear too obvious. A keeper who takes too much pleasure in killing player characters may soon find himself with no one to play with.

Another thing starting keepers should remember is that both player ingenuity and player stupidity should earn their just rewards. Adopting this suggestion is very simple. Those player characters who do the research, ask the right questions, come up with a reasonable plan to deal with the menace before them, and take every precaution to be safe deserve every break the keeper can provide. A keeper should not feel above bending the rules in favor of their players from time to time, as long as he isn't blatant about it. If a player comes up with a truly great idea, even if it will notably change the expected outcome of the adventure, then for heaven's sake let the player utilize that idea. If you don't, you run the risk that he or she won't even try to be creative the next time. On the other hand, those player characters who ignore clues, don't do research, don't take safety precautions, and always engage in head to head confrontations with their opponents don't deserve help from the keeper. This doesn't mean that you should punish them or in any way treat them unfairly. Just play the game by the book with no rules-bending for their benefit. Chances are they will get what they deserve soon enough.

7) SET THE PROPER PACE

The art of being a *Call of Cthulhu* keeper is like the art of cooking – undercooking or overcooking can spoil even the best recipe. As the master of the game it is your duty to set the pace of the adventure. It is important that you know what scenes to play out in vivid detail and which ones you can quickly gloss over in order to speed up the session and avoid player boredom. When the investigators are searching a room, talking

