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GENERAL DIRECTIVE #9

From the desk of Quinn Sebastian

Missions into Orrorsh are volunteer only. I won't think less of any Storm Knight who steps back from one, and I hope no one else will either. But people there still need help, and still need hope, so those of you who do volunteer represent the best and bravest that the Delphi Council has to offer. Thank you all!

Quinn Sebastian

THE THREE TRIALS OF TALAMOUS SCRATCH

BY SHANIELA CYN HENSLEY

COSM: ORRORSH

**LOCATION: SOMEWHERE IN THE
ARABIAN SEA**

THE NEAR NOW...

His wounds were mortal, but it wasn't the first time he'd died. The first had been much more painful. A fatal dalliance with a local girl or three...chemically induced...sealed his fate at the hands of angry townsfolk. They trapped him in a barn on Gaea and burned him alive inside it.

Now *that* had been painful.

This wound was killing him slowly. He wasn't sure *which* of his enemies had caused it. The Storm Knights who tracked him to Malraux's realm had attacked in such a fury he couldn't be sure who dealt the lethal strike. He recalled only a flash of light and the timely intervention of his servants. Their sacrifice allowed him to crawl into a hiding space and eventually escape.

Perhaps the wound was blessed by some sort of divine power because the damnable thing wouldn't heal. None of Talamous' potions, incantations, or even the technology of the Cyberpapacy could seal it. The attempts had at least prolonged his life, however. And the agony. Which he richly deserved. Even he knew that. The sorcerer-scientist chuckled at the carnage and mischief he'd gotten away with for so many blood-soaked decades.

The Gaunt Man had pulled him from limbo after his first death, no doubt recognizing his genius and bankrupt soul. It wasn't likely the High Lord would do so again—he despised failure so. And Scratch's failures were many. He'd fled Orrorsh, red-coated Victorians hot on his heels, after failing the simple task of minding a gospog field. He'd fled to France and failed again when he plumbed the secrets of the GodNet and attempted to unleash a Black Plague upon its faithful users.

So close. So close. Scratch would love to have seen Malraux's rage.

VICTORIAN FRIGATE

3 METERS

TOP
DECK

MAIN
DECK

MIDDLE
DECK

LOWER
DECK

The wicked old man gazed out over a stormy sea. He was somewhere off the coast of Pakistan. He'd fled through the Mediterranean to Egypt, seeking a cure for the slow death he could feel eating away his insides, but despite some intriguing revelations, Mobius' realm had no cures. He passed through Syria and the scorching deserts of Iraq before finally catching an Iranian freighter bound for India...for Orrorsh. The sinister embrace of the occult was the thread that would tie his last chance together. He would bind pulp magic and Cyberpapacy technology to the axioms of his home and bend reality to his awful will.

But his life force was slipping away rapidly. He feared he would not make it. He would be dead before he crossed the boundary into Orrorsh. He could feel Death's presence leering greedily from the shadows. It was a presence he knew all too well. Death had already feasted on the crew this night, but it was always hungry for more.

Scratch smelled the salt sea, felt the tingle of lightning on his pallid flesh, and listened intently to the roar of the waves and the creaking iron of the freighter. His sordid, twisted life was coming to an end. At least as he currently knew it.

The freighter charged onward, the captain's dead hands holding steady on the wheel, directly into the raging reality storm...

MISSION BRIEFING

This short tale of horror begins when one of the heroes receives an urgent call from a French member of the Delphi Council.

"Bonjour, mes amis! I hope you have recovered after your most recent adventures. We and all the people of the free world appreciate your sacrifice and esprit de corps! We can never repay the debt we owe to you, but we must ask for your assistance once again.

"I will be direct. Perhaps you have heard of an Orrorshan Nightmare named Talamous Scratch, no? He is a very dangerous sorcerer-scientist who committed a number of atrocities in both France and Orrorsh. We almost got him in New Culmont, but somehow he escaped and made his way across the Middle East to Basrah, Iran. There he boarded

a freighter, the MV Multan, bound for Karachi, Pakistan and Orrorsh.

"Sebastian wants him taken at all costs. He is most dangerous, and if he will not surrender, no one here will mourn his murderous hide.

"One more thing. We know from various agents he has been seeking various healing methods from France to Iran. He may be mortally wounded. If he reaches Orrorsh, it's likely his talents will allow him to recover. Perhaps even grow more powerful given all he learned in Malraux's realm. We must prevent this tragedy, so we are sending a helicopter for you now. It will take you directly to the MV Multan somewhere in the Arabian Sea. We will give you Interpol credentials so you may search the ship and commandeer the crew."

Be very careful, mes amis. Talamous Scratch is as dangerous as they come."

SCENE ONE: A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

Standard Scene. Scratch murdered the freighter's crew with a cruel and terrible poison that left their corpses twisted and contorted. Their lives fueled a dark ritual that allowed Talamous to merge his essence with the MV Multan, which soon after transformed into a 19th century sailing ship as it entered a fierce reality storm off the coast of Pakistan.

The Multan and Scratch are now one—a living abomination of creaking wood, tattered sails, and black-hearted malice.

NIGHT LANDING

The Storm Knights are delivered to the last known location of the vessel by helicopter. It's 10 p.m. and pitch dark except for occasional flashes of lightning. The pilot—a Storm Knight named Jawad—gives the group a limited window to find their target. Otherwise he says he must turn around and abort the mission.

"It's too dangerous!" he yells over the roaring winds and struggling rotors. "I've lost the Multan's signal, and the winds are too strong to stay here much longer. I'll give it one pass then we've got to head back."

Jawad circles a patch of angry sea, searchlights blazing and electronic pings echoing in the heroes' headsets. "I don't see anything. I'm going to call it..." he shouts over the raging winds.

Have the Storm Knights make a *find* test. Whoever gets the highest result just happens to catch a glimpse of a dark shape bobbing on a distant wave...a shape the size of a ship. Assuming they tell Jawad, he replies that it's right on the edge of the storm and he'd best not risk it. If they don't try to convince him otherwise, see the **Reluctant Heroes** sidebar.

Hopefully, the Storm Knights attempt to persuade Jawad to take the chopper in low for a look. This requires a Challenging (DN 12) success. If they do, he reluctantly agrees and flies to the edge of the storm. There they spy a large, three-masted ship instead of a modern freighter!

Jawad shines a spotlight on the ship's upper deck but sees no one. Then he wheels around the side to its name. The words MV MULTAN are visible, but there's a long, dark tear...or a scratch... right through the letters. "This is it. It's transformed. Still want to go through with it?" asks Jawad.

Assuming the party does so, he lowers a cable and they slide down to the deck below. He hands them a satellite phone and tells them to call when they want pick up. He warns it may take a couple of hours depending on how far he has to retreat from the storm.

SCENE TWO: WHEN AXIOMS COLLIDE

Dramatic Scene. Talamous Scratch is a formidable sorcerer. Though he could not cure his wound, research into the Walking Gods of Cairo taught him he could forestall his death with a strange ritual that merged his essence with that of an object's. In this case, the MV Multan!

Scratch murdered the crew to provide the occult energy then waited on a powerful reality storm to transform the vessel. When it did, he completed his dark spell and became one with the ship.

RELUCTANT HEROES

We tried to play nice and let the players feel like they had a choice, but if they let Jawad head away from the storm they're in for some additional trouble. Read the following in this eventuality:

Jawad gives you a smile and a thumbs-up. "Good choice! We don't do any good to the resistance dead!" He slowly turns the helicopter around, away from the storm. As he does so, a flash of lightning briefly illuminates the vessel in the distance. It can't be the Multan...what you see is a sailing ship! It has large sails—though a few seem to be broken—and is rising violently on the waves. Then all goes dark and it's lost to the night.

Jawad flips a switch and tries to radio back to his contacts. "This is DC-13. The weather is too rough. I'm turning around and aborting the..."

Before Jawad can finish a massive bolt of lightning slams into the helicopter. The power goes out and you're suddenly spinning violently in complete darkness. "HOLD ON!" Jawad screams as he attempts to auto-rotate the failing aircraft into the storm-tossed sea.

The helicopter slams into the ocean with bone-crunching impact. The Storm Knights fade in and out of consciousness as the chopper fills with water. They remember flashes of light, Jawad slumped dead over the controls, then frantically smashing out the windows to escape into the frothing sea. Within minutes, all traces of their transportation—and Jawad along with it—have vanished.

Allow the Storm Knights to flail around in the darkness a bit. Even those who can fly don't know where they are or how to get back to land. This is truly a dire situation. Fortunately, perhaps, the transformed Multan is already on its way to them. When it arrives, a single dangling rope allows them to climb to the deck and resume the tale. Move on to Scene Two when they make it aboard.

But that isn't the end of Scratch's plan. His time in the Cyberpapacy showed him how to siphon off the Possibility Energy of his enemies. With enough of it absorbed into the ghost ship's black heart, he can live once again!

Talamous has no special powers to avoid contradiction or disconnection—he's just willing to risk it. He enjoys playing with the fires of reality and even savors the harsh lessons it often inflicts upon him.

The vessel acts as a giant conduit, channeling Possibility Energy into the black heart beating in the hold. Every Possibility the Storm Knights spend while aboard the MV Multan gives Scratch another chance at the wretched life he lived before. Once he gets 10 Possibilities, his resurrection is assured. Best of all, the MV Multan will remain a living golem under his control. He'll be able to prey on the innocent up and down the coast of Pakistan and India for years.

To that end, he's created three golems with what little energy he has left. Each is designed to be just enough of a challenge for the foolish heroes to spend their Possibility Energy. The first of these horrors is in the Captain's Cabin.

Note that Scratch is the Multan now. He hears, sees, and senses everything the invaders do while aboard the vessel. That means he can't be surprised, can open and close doors as he wishes, and can generally manipulate any part of the ship he wants as a maneuver or attack. Use this to push the party along as needed, terrify them with manufactured beings or visions, or even cause them to trip as they descend the groaning staircases into the lower levels.

THE CAPTAIN'S CABIN

The heroes stand atop the storm-tossed deck in the driving rain. Boxes of cargo, barrels of oil, and other transformed goods are lashed down on the Multan's surface. A single crewman stands at the captain's wheel.

Closer investigation finds the broken corpse of a middle-aged Pakistani lashed to the wheel, his hands bound with rope to the handles. His eyes have rolled back in his head, and his mouth is

locked open in an eternal scream. The insignia on his collar marks him as the captain if anyone thinks to look.

After a few minutes in the cold rain, give everyone an Easy (DN 8) *find* roll. Those who make it hear two things. The first is a very faint, rhythmic thump—probably loose cargo rolling around somewhere below (it's actually Scratch's heart, but don't clue the party in just yet). The noise is a strangely muffled cry for help from the rear of the ship (Area A). Anyone who makes an Easy (DN 8) *water vehicles* test knows this area usually contains the captain's cabin.

The port door in the hallway leading to the captain's cabin is open but slams shut loudly as the ship suddenly pitches starboard. It remains open afterward and contains a couple of cots and random possessions rolling around the tilting floor.

The starboard door and the center stern door are locked, requiring either a Hard (DN 14) *lockpicking* or Challenging (DN 12) *Strength* test to open. Scratch wants these to open so they do eventually...even opening on their own if the party can't manage it. He just wants them to spend Possibilities to open them if they meet with initial failure!

The starboard door is the Captain's meeting room. It contains a desk, charts, and five chairs for the senior crew. It also contains another door leading to the Captain's Cabin (requiring *lockpicking* or *Strength* to open as above).

The cries for help turn into screams as the Storm Knights draw near. "HELP ME! HELP ME PLEASE!" someone screams. Despite the cacophonous storm it's clear the voice belongs to a young woman.

When the group finally opens the door, they see Talamous Scratch standing over a faceless young girl! She screams despite having no mouth, a tongue—or something—bulging at the taut skin where her mouth should be! She has long black hair and wears a tattered white dress. Her skin shines like the moon and her nails are broken and cracked.

Talamous cackles with glee as the rescuers enter the captain's cabin. He's a pale, bald man with a sharp nose and a frail figure. This version of Talamous

is 7' tall and must stoop in the low cabin (the real Talamous is 5'6" on those rare occasions he stands up straight). He holds a black dagger and wears a worn black robe. He's very much the image of an Orrorsh sorcerer...though he's actually nothing more than a powerful simulacrum made from the ship's own living flesh!

The golem poses little danger to a party of Storm Knights—Scratch wants it to wreak some havoc but not kill the interlopers. He only wants them to struggle against his creations, spending Possibilities and feeding them into his still-beating heart in the Hold!

The golem is clearly resistant to damage—the Storm Knights are likely to think it's just magical protection. The thing doesn't talk, though it cackles, gestures, and taunts the heroes if it has the opportunity. When it opens its mouth, its tongue has been bitten off and black blood pours out in grotesque rivulets.

The girl is an amalgamation of all the victims Scratch has killed through the years. If she's "rescued," her savior sees a flash of faces on her featureless skull, almost like projections. Once the Orrorshan golem is defeated, she melts into a gray-white goo...perhaps in a hero's arms...and seeps down into the floorboards.

TALAMOUS SCRATCH (ORRORSHAN FLESH GOLEM)

Attributes: Charisma 5, Dexterity 8, Mind 8, Spirit 8, Strength 15

Skills: Dodge 9, find 9, intimidation 14, maneuver 9, stealth 8, taunt 13, unarmed combat 12

Move: 4; **Tough:** 17; **Shock:** —; **Wounds:** 3

Equipment: Sacrificial dagger (Strength +1/16).

Perks: —

Possibilities: 3

Special Abilities:

- **Armor +2:** The golem's flesh is dense and tough.
- **Cloak of Darkness:** The golem gains a Toughness bonus equal to the current darkness penalty.
- **Construct:** Constructs are immune to poison and other effects that require breathing, eating, or other living processes.

- **Fear:** Scratch is terrible enough in his actual appearance, but the golem version of him is slightly off, disturbing some who look upon its awkward form.

- **Insidious:** When Scratch performs an Approved Action against a character, randomly discard a Destiny card from his pool.

- **Relentless:** The golem ignores Shock damage.

THE TELLTALE HEART, PART I

Once the scene in the cabin is resolved, have the Storm Knights make another Easy (DN 8) find roll. Those who make it hear the thumping again, just a little faster than before. A Good Success is sure it's a heartbeat, beating at about the rate of a sleeping human.

A MESS IN THE MESS

Soon after the last encounter is resolved, the party hears chanting from the bow of the middle deck. If they peer down through the cargo netting, they see the bodies of the Multan crew strewn about. A single lantern sways back and forth, casting dancing light and shadows on the grisly scene. The bodies are twisted and contorted awkwardly just like the captain's. A Standard (DN 10) evidence analysis roll suggests they likely died from a poison that violently contracts the victim's muscles.

Standing before the bodies, toward the bow, is a figure they can't quite make out through the cargo hole. They'll have to drop through or sneak down the stairwells to get a better view. When they do, they note the figure is another version of Talamous Scratch! This time his bald head is laced with various cybergear and he wears black body armor clearly manufactured in Malraux's realm! As the heroes approach, the villain turns to face them. Great, electric claws grow from his forearms, glowing and humming with power in the darkness.

Scratch isn't alone. At the most opportune moment, the undead crew of the MV Multan rise and attack! As before, Scratch's goal isn't to kill the heroes—at least not all of them. He just wants them to wade through enough fodder to spend Possibilities and fuel his desperate return!

- **Undead Crew:** (3 per Storm Knight): see Hungry Dead on page 79.

TALAMOUS SCRATCH (CYBER GOLEM)

Attributes: Charisma 5, Dexterity 8, Mind 8, Spirit 8, Strength 15

Skills: Dodge 9, find 9, intimidation 14, maneuver 9, melee weapons 12, stealth 8, taunt 13, unarmed combat 12

Move: 4; **Tough:** 19; **Shock:** —; **Wounds:** 3

Equipment: None.

Perks: —

Possibilities: 3

Special Abilities:

- **Dermal Plating +4:** The golem's flesh is covered with patches of black dermal plates.
- **Construct:** Constructs are immune to poison and other effects that require breathing, eating, or other living processes.
- **Electric Claws:** Damage *Strength* +4(19), AP 1. The electrical charge causes an additional +2 Shock (+4 Shock with a Good hit, +6 with an Outstanding hit).
- **Fear:** Seeing Scratch enhanced by cyberware causes a new Fear test, even for those who saw his previous form.
- **Insidious:** When Scratch performs an Approved Action against a character, randomly discard a Destiny card from his pool.
- **Relentless:** The golem ignores Shock damage.

THE TELLTALE HEART, PART II

When the carnage finally ends, there's a moment of silence broken only by the constant creaking of the MV Multan. Everyone now hears the unmistakable rhythmic beating of a heart somewhere down below. Anyone who heard it above notices it's faster now... about the speed of a human's heart if he were walking briskly.

THE BLOODY HOLD

The heart beats firmly below. It's clear that whatever lurks in this ship hides somewhere below in its dark belly.

The party can enter from the stairs or they can drop down through the cargo hole between decks. Either way, it's a descent into pure nightmare.

The hold is flooded waist-deep with viscous black blood, sloshing back and forth as the Multan rocks

in the churning sea. Veins and arteries pulse along the walls, ceiling, and floor, emanating from the stern and growing up and out toward the bow. Fleshy pockets have begun to manifest as well, dotted here and there with ugly black tumors and pustulent boils (remnants of the wound Scratch can not yet heal!).

Clever parties might seek to sever these bloodlines, but it has no immediate effect on the overall health of the massive ship.

The noise of the great heart is overwhelming in the enclosed helm. (If you have access to a sound track with a rapidly beating heart, play it now!) It beats faster and faster as the heroes approach, eager to consume their lives and Possibility energy!

As soon as the adventurers step into the hold, Scratch's final form rises from the blood at Area C. It's pitch black down here, but one of Scratch's eyes shines green, scanning the intruders as they approach. A single electric claw tears its way through his forearm and crackles with electricity. The light momentarily illuminates his form. He seems an amalgamation of Errorsh and the Cyberpacy, axioms battling within his soul by its very existence.

Scratch cackles and hurls a bolt of electricity at whomever's closest before the fight begins, then battle is joined!

This final form is Scratch's most powerful. Once again it's designed to draw Possibility energy from the heroes. Every time they spend one, allow them to make a Challenging (DN 12) find roll to notice the heart pulse slightly stronger and faster.

Scratch wants to ensure the interlopers spend their precious Possibilities, so he's created all-new horrors to plague his antagonists with. A number of death's head wyrms swim silently in the waist-deep blood. Once the heroes are firmly in their midst, they attempt to ambush from behind. The hateful creatures are long, worm-like things with hardened scales and a human skull that eerily resembles Scratch's. Each head is fitted with cybernetic eyes to see in the dark, what looks like a bear claw for a mouth, and six centipede-like legs it uses for locomotion or to rise up and attack. They crackle with electricity and are of course coated in thick, slimy blood.