

WE BOTH REACHED FOR THE GUN

I never gonna say I seen everything the CZ has to offer again. I mean, I seen a lot—devil rats eating desiccated ghoulish corpses, giant ant-like things the size of an ork, strange glowing beings crawling out of crumbled slag heaps—I seen it and I survived. But then the other day, I hit a spot of trouble like I do, and I had a pack of Horde maggots chasing me down hard, looking to slap out my brains, and I turned on the jets and got my legs moving through the streets like a rocket car over the salt flats. I pulled some of the normal tricks, in a door here, out a window here, sneaking into basements that had exits only I knew about, and I got some separation between them and me, and I slowed up for a second just as one of them turned a corner about three blocks down. I started moving again, of course, but the piece of drek took a lucky shot and tore off a piece of my sock and a good chunk of skin underneath. Maybe even some bone, because the second I put weight on it, it wanted to collapse.

I don't need to tell you that's not good, and I knew staying out in the open would make me dead. So I looked at the big building that was standing in front of me, and I went in. There was a rolling door with a bad lock, I managed to heave it up and get inside, and that's when things got weird.

First was the mist. I seen mold and smoke and other drek in building, but not a cascading mist. It wasn't right. And it got even less right when a dragon—yeah, a dragon—swooped down outta nowhere, breathing fire that somehow didn't burn me to a crisp as I ran and rolled forward.

And entered a swamp. You heard me. There was a swamp in the damn building, with murky water and trees and hanging vines and everything. And I swear something stuck in those vines, moving back and away from me. I yelled to them but they disappeared. Into the swamp. In the building.

Well, my ankle was smarting pretty good at that point, and I didn't know what was in that water that was seeping into the wound, and plus did I mention that I was seeing a swamp in a building? So I didn't feel right about anything, and I decided to leave, but there was the dragon behind me, so I tried to find another way out stumbling through the swamp. I splashed some in the water as I waded out, I stumbled here and there, until I finally caught a tree root on my bad ankle and went down flat.

And when I tried to get up, there was an honest-to-God barbarian standing in front of me, with the flowing hair and huge muscles and big-ass sword and everything. I'd had it by this point, so I went for my hip to grab my pistol to tell the sucker to back off. But he reached for it too, and damn was he fast, because after a second the gun was in his hand.

He looked it over. It didn't look right in the hands of a guy wearing a loincloth, but he seemed comfortable handling it. And he had a good eye for hardware, because he knew it was a nice piece.

"This is good," he said, in weird, stiff tones. "I will accept this as tribute for passing through my realm."

"You can't have it," I said. "The Horde. They're coming. I'll be dead without it."

The guy's eyes narrowed. "The Horde does not interfere with my realm. They know what happens when they do."

"Yeah, sure, buddy. But I still need my gun."

He frowned. "Tribute should be freely offered. Your manners are bad."

And just like that his arm flashed and he clocked me on the head with my own pistol.

When I came to I was on the street. I jumped up, my instincts telling me to look around for the Horde members coming after me. And sure enough, there they were, four of them, lying on the ground. At least most of them. Their heads were gone.

I may not know everything about the city like I thought I did, but I still know this—when you're surrounded by headless bodies, you get the hell out and don't go back. So that's what I did.

No, I ain't telling you where this place is. Some things, I think it's best they stay secret.

COVER

WE BOTH REACHED FOR THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF SHADOWS

PLAYER HANDOUTS



INTRODUCTION

SRM 5A-02: *Critic's Choice* is a *Shadowrun Missions* living campaign adventure. Full information on the *Shadowrun Missions* living campaign is available at shadowrunnable.com/missions and includes a guide to creating *Missions* characters and a regularly updated FAQ. All maps, player handouts, and other playing aids are found at the end of this document.

PREPARING THE ADVENTURE

SRM 5A-02: *Critic's Choice* is intended for use with *Shadowrun, Fifth Edition*, and all character and rules information refers to the fifth edition of the *Shadowrun* rules.

ADVENTURE STRUCTURE

SRM 5A-02: *Critic's Choice* consists of several scenes. These scenes form the basis of the adventure, which should be completed in approximately four hours. If you are running short on time, you should streamline each and be a little more generous with clues, target numbers, and other requirements to aid in guiding the players through the adventure.

Each scene outlines the most likely sequence of events, as well as how to handle unexpected twists and turns that inevitably crop up. Each one contains the following subsections, providing gamemasters with all the information necessary to run it.

- **Scan This** provides a quick synopsis of the scene's action, allowing you to get a feel for the encounter at a glance.
- **Tell It to Them Straight** is written to be read aloud to the players, describing what their characters experience upon entering the scene. You should feel free to modify the narrative as much as desired to suit the group and the situation, since the characters may arrive at the scene by different means or under different circumstances than the text assumes.
- **Behind the Scenes** covers the bulk of the scene, describing what's happening, what the non-player characters are doing, how they will react to the player characters' actions, and so forth. It also covers the setting of the encounter, going over environmental conditions and other properties of the location as well as providing any descriptions of important items.
- **Pushing the Envelope** looks at ways to make the encounter more challenging for experienced or powerful characters and other ways you can add some extra spice to the scene. This subsection

should usually only be used for home games, or games where time is not a factor. At most convention and Open Play events, gamemasters should omit this information. It adds to the scene but does not contain important information.

- **Debugging** offers solutions to potential problems that may crop up during the encounter. While it's impossible to foresee everything that a group of player characters might do, this section tries to anticipate common problems and other suggestions for dealing with them.

RUNNING THE ADVENTURE

Gamemastering is more of an art than a science, and every gamemaster does things a bit differently. Use your own style when it comes to preparing and running the adventure and do whatever you feel is best to provide the best *Shadowrun* game you can for your players. *Shadowrun Missions* adventures are designed to run in a standard four-hour convention time slot.

Please keep this in mind when running the adventure. You should leave at least 15-20 minutes at the end of the time slot to complete any necessary paperwork and pass out the players' **Debriefing Logs**. (Make sure that you have enough copies of the **Debriefing Log** for this adventure to give one copy to each player after running the adventure.) This section offers some guidelines you may find useful in preparing to run *SRM 5A-02: Critic's Choice* (or any *Shadowrun Missions* adventure).

STEP 1: READ THE ADVENTURE

Carefully read the adventure from beginning to end. Get a feel for the overall plot and what happens in each scene. That way, if something different happens, you won't be caught off guard and you can adapt things smoothly.

STEP 2: TAKE NOTES

Take notes for yourself while reading through the adventure that you can refer to later on. Possible things to note include: major plot points (so you can see them all at a glance), the names of various non-player characters, possible problems you notice, situations where you think a particular character can shine and other things you'll want to keep in mind while running the adventure.

STEP 3: KNOW THE CHARACTERS

Prior to the start of the adventure, examine the PCs' record sheets and Debriefing Logs for your reference and have basic information about their important abil-

COVER

WE BOTH
REACHED FOR
THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION
SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP
THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF
SHADOWS

PLAYER
HANDOUTS



ities handy so you can refer to it during play. Also go over the characters and keep their previous events listed on the Debriefing Logs in mind when determining non-player character actions in various scenes if such a dynamic has been included.

STEP 4: DON'T PANIC!

Gamemastering involves juggling a lot of different things. Sometimes you drop the ball and forget something or you just make a mistake. It happens, don't worry about it. Nobody is perfect all of the time and everybody makes mistakes. Just pick up from there and move on. Your players will understand and forget about it once you get back into the action.

STEP 5: CHALLENGE THE PLAYERS

Gamemasters should challenge the players but should generally not overwhelm them. This is not to say that games cannot be deadly. If the characters die through their own actions and repercussions of those actions, then so be it. But the idea is to challenge the players and their characters, not to bury them. If the enemies and challenges are too light for the characters present, then increase them. On the other hand, if the characters are badly outmatched by the enemies, then tone them down. Make things difficult but not impossible.

GENERAL ADVENTURE RULES

Shadowrun Missions adventures use the rules presented in *Shadowrun, Fifth Edition (SR5)*. Standard rules such as success tests, limits, glitches, critical successes, and other common mechanics are described in *SR5* and are not repeated in this adventure.

Please keep in mind when preparing for the adventure, that the PCs will not necessarily comprise a balanced party. It's entirely possible that the party will be made up entirely of technomancers or back-to-nature shamans. If the characters run into a brick wall because of such complications, show flexibility and use your best judgment in how you lead them back to the plot.

NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

Non-player characters (NPCs) are essential to any adventure. They are the allies, antagonists, and background characters in the adventure that interact with the player characters. NPCs in this adventure have already been created and can be found throughout the adventure.

Minor NPCs are found in the individual scene that they appear in, and generally have a brief write up, noting only their important skills and the gear they are carrying.

Major NPCs can be found in the **Cast of Shadows** at the end of the adventure. They have more detailed write ups and include most of the skills and the gear they have access to.

The NPCs in this adventure should generally stand up to the average player character but may need some adjustment to suit a particular group of characters, especially a more experienced and powerful group. The scenes and NPC descriptions offer tips on adjusting the NPCs to suit the abilities of the characters in your group. To adjust the power level of an NPC, refer to **Helps and Hindrances** (p. 378, *SR5*). Take the player characters' abilities into consideration when assessing the NPCs in this adventure and modify them accordingly.

MISSION DIFFICULTY

Gamemasters are encouraged to use their own judgment and to adjust the difficulty of the encounter to take into account the abilities of the players. If the players have no magical support, replace magical defenses with mundane ones. If the players are weak on combat, reduce the number of enemies by one or two. Conversely, if they're steamrolling the opposition, add one or two enemies to the fight. Missions should be difficult and something of a challenge but should not be insurmountable.

A simple method for adjusting difficulty is to simply increase the dice pools and Professional Ratings of the enemies. A simple +1 or +2 to all combat and defense tests gives enemies a minor boost in power, while a +3 or 4 will make them truly formidable. Adding to their Professional Rating will give them a larger group Edge pool to draw from, and gamemasters are encouraged to use this Edge when logical.

Often a combat scene will tell you if it's supposed to be challenging or is simply there to serve as filler or a minor obstacle that the players should steamroll through. When possible, use this as a guide to know when to tweak the enemies and encounters. If it doesn't say, assume the scene should present a challenge to the power levels of the players.

A NOTE ON LOOT AND LOOTING

Gamemasters should be careful what they allow players access to, because they can and will try to steal everything not nailed down (and even then, they often have pry bars and claw hammers to deal with those nails). *Shadowrun Missions* operate under the assumption that two players who have run the same missions will have roughly the same amount of resources available to them (give or take some negotiation and a little bit of minor loot fenced), so when players are able to steal and fence a lot of gear or are able to get their hands on high-priced vehicles, cyberdecks, or foci, it

COVER

WE BOTH
REACHED FOR
THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION
SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP
THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF
SHADOWS

PLAYER
HANDOUTS



can unbalance the game and make it unfair to players who didn't have the opportunity to get those items. Gamemasters should avoid letting the players get into a position to do high-value looting whenever possible.

CHICAGO, THE CZ, NOISE, AND BACKGROUND COUNTS

While for many the Chicago and the Bug City Containment Zone are synonymous, the CZ comprises less than one-third of the total landmass of the city of Chicago proper, not counting suburban areas and farmlands connected to the city. But the CZ is still big, and it is the rotted, gutted, feral heart of the Windy City. It starts at 115th Street to the south and runs nearly thirty kilometers north to Belmont Avenue, and reaches from the Lake Michigan on the east to an average of fifteen kilometers inland to Harlem Avenue on the west. A mass of torn-down buildings and hastily erected barricades were added to and reinforced over the three-year period that the Containment Zone was in effect, and even now nearly twenty years later this barrier stands as an imposing divide between the Zone and the outside world. Anyone can supposedly freely travel between the Zone and Chicago proper, but Lone Star watches those coming out and the gangs and warlords watch those going in very closely.

Between the Cermak Blast, the bugs, the debilitating effects of FAB III, and years of death and metahuman misery, astral space in and around the Zone is horrible. Unless otherwise noted in the scene, assume a default background count of 2 anytime characters are within the Containment Zone. The count fluctuates wildly at times, so players should expect to encounter everything from high background counts and mana voids to various aspected backgrounds and mana warps. (See **Background Count** sidebar for full rules. Future *Shadowrun*, *Fifth Edition* rulebooks may supersede these rules). Areas of Chicago outside the CZ may also suffer background count bleed from the Zone.

Besides the background count, the CZ is a virtual nightmare for deckers and technomancers. The persistent low-level background radiation coupled with a distinct lack of modern matrix broadcasting equipment through the area results in a high level of constant background Noise that makes even basic matrix communication difficult. Noise levels will vary from area to area, but unless otherwise specified in the scene, assume a default Noise level of 2 anytime the characters are within the Containment Zone.

BACKGROUND COUNTS

Background counts impose a negative dice pool penalty equal to their rating for all tests that are linked to or utilize magic in any way (i.e., spellcasting, summoning, assensing, any test made while astrally projecting, and any active skill that benefits from active adept powers such as killing hands, critical strike, great leap, or improved skills, etc). Dual-natured creatures and spirits suffer this penalty to all actions.

Aspected background counts grant a boost to any limit that utilizes magic in any way (see above) to any metahuman, spirit, or dual-natured creature that matches the aspected domain. This includes spellcasting Force limits, so spellcasters need to be careful as it can be hard to control the additional surge of mana. Any magically active being that does not match the aspected domain should treat this as a normal background count and suffer penalties.

Background counts above 12 are called either a flux (for aspected domains) or a void (for magically dead zones), and are very dangerous. Any being that is magically or astrally active in any way (dual natured, astrally perceiving, casting a spell, has an active adept power, has an active foci, etc.) takes background count – 12 unresisted Stun Damage each turn that they are active and exposed to the flux or void.

PAPERWORK

After running a *Shadowrun Missions* adventure, there are several important pieces of paperwork that need to be filled out.

The first is to make certain to distribute a copy of the adventure's **Debriefing Log** to each player. As the gamemaster, please make certain to fill this out and sign off on it for each character. In the interests of time, you may have each player fill out the sections, with appropriate values that you give them. Please consider the PCs' actions in the scenario when providing Reputation modifiers, per those rules (p. 372, SR5).

The second is to make sure that all players have updated their character's **Mission Calendar**. PCs are allowed to go on one run per week. The calendar is used to track the character's monthly lifestyle expenses, adventures, and their downtime exploits.

Finally, once an adventure is completed gamemasters should head over to the official *Shadowrun* forums at forums.shadowruntabletop.com and look in the *Shadowrun Missions* section. There will be a section to post the outcome of the Missions adventure. Future adventures will be affected by these results. Without gamemaster feedback, the PCs' exploits will be unable to affect the larger campaign.

COVER

WE BOTH
REACHED FOR
THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION
SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP
THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF
SHADOWS

PLAYER
HANDOUTS



MISSION SYNOPSIS

The runners are invited to meet with Sid at the Vault, a former community data center, and see Matt Wrath in action. Sid is looking to make a name for himself as a Johnson around the Chicago shadow community. On the way to the meet, the runners encounter one of the numerous dangers plaguing the city of Chicago—the Fleshmongers, a macabre go-gang that trades fresh metahuman flesh to some factions of Ghouls Town for guns and ammunition. This particular group of Fleshmongers the runner encounter is abducting a family from a broken-down Leyland-Rover Transport on the side of the road.

Once the runners make it to the Vault, they find Sid as Matt Wrath stands over the body of a crumpled troll. Sid takes the runners back to the locker room where he tells them he has connections and can make a very lucrative team. He explains the Johnson, Dr. Tate, is next door in his medical facility and makes the introduction. As Sid is closing up some business, Matt Wrath informs the team his friend Becky 99, who is also here in the Vault, has need of a team and he believes the two jobs are compatible.

Dr. Tate informs the runners he wishes to open a second clinic located closer to the heart of the Zone. He

has worked connections within the mayor's office and learned a perfect section of land will be coming up for auction in two days—that is, unless someone manages to produce the proper ownership to the right people inside City Hall. Dr. Tate could take his chances at the auction, but he believes hiring the team to break into an abandoned building and recover the records from their vault would be much cheaper, thereby letting him expand his clinic and help the citizens in need much faster.

As the runners prepare to leave, if they have not followed up on Matt's advice, a young mouse of a girl approaches them and asks them to meet with a friend of hers back in Barter Square, a makeshift shopping section of the Vault. The team is then introduced to the leader of the Desolation Angels, Becky 99. Becky knows Sid is looking to make a name for himself as a fixer and has been working with Dr. Tate. She offers the runners a job to recover some old sim chips while they are in the facility Dr. Tate wants the team to hit.

The runners will then head to the old headquarters of Brilliant Genesis Chicago—now an interactive *Neil the Ark Bala* simsense amusement park—where they must remove the inhabitants and find some way to recover the paydata.

COVER

WE BOTH
REACHED FOR
THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION
SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP
THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF
SHADOWS

PLAYER
HANDOUTS

Sample file



SCENE 1

ALL I CARE ABOUT

SCAN THIS

The team is contacted by a fixer named Sid, who wants to set up a meet with a potential Mr. Johnson at the Vault.

TELL IT TO THEM STRAIGHT

Nights like this remind you why Chicago is known as the Windy City and make you wonder why you haven't found someplace with a more hospitable climate. As you ponder that thought, your commlink chirps with an incoming call.

As you answer the call you are greeted with the sight of a short, squat man with greasy hair slicked back into a ponytail, smoking a cigar. "Hey kid," he says, "word around the Zone is you're open for some work. Well, my name's Sid, and I'm your guy. I know everybody! So why don't you make your way on over to the Vault so we can have a chat? I have a lead on a choice job that's perfect for your team, and for your time I will make sure it's a visit you will never forget. I will be ringside with the champ."

BEHIND THE SCENES

Over the years, surviving the Zone taught Sid how to pounce on an opportunity when one is presented. Mayor Brown and Governor Presbitero sparked a massive land grab with their plans to revitalize and repurpose unused land in downtown Chicago and offer incentives to lure businesses back. Dr. Martin Tate runs a clinic (backed by Truman Technologies) on the north side of the zone and is looking to expand his service area. Dr. Tate set his eyes on a facility once owned by Brilliant Genesis near the south side of the zone. Sid got wind of Dr. Tate's plans and—always looking to score some nuyen—convinced the good doctor he's the man to pull a team together and deliver what he needs.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

With over twenty years of neglect and war zone-like conditions, communications in and around the Zone are spotty at best. Through the static and noise, the team can make out the words "work," "everybody," "forget," and "ring." The LTG number that called them is registered to the United Brotherhood, and the call can be traced back to a spot in the Zone known as the Vault.

DEBUGGING

There is little that can go wrong here. If the players are hesitant to take the job, Sid will sweeten the deal by offering them 500 nuyen just to come hear him out.

THE VAULT

The Vault is an old community datacenter on the corner of W. Addison St. and N. Kimball Ave. The exterior structure of the building is pitted and charred. Its reinforced concrete exterior shows signs of age, with exposed rebar in the half-meter thick walls. The building is encircled with two rows of staggered, attack-resistant bollards that prevent anything larger than a motorcycle from getting too close to the walls. Inside the facility are three main areas: the power plant, the offices, and the server farm. The power plant area, which once housed a large generator and underground diesel reservoir, has been converted to a makeshift entertainment arena known for its high-profile pit fights. The office area has been converted to a makeshift street clinic; the tattered remnants of the cubicle partitions have been converted to recovery cots and private examination rooms. The few walled offices now serve as operating theaters and quarantine rooms. The clinic is run by Dr. Martin Tate. The old server farm with its rows of chain-link cages has become a barter quare with a reputation for having what you need if you can pay the price.

COVER

WE BOTH
REACHED FOR
THE GUN

INTRO

MISSION
SYNOPSIS

SCENE 1

SCENE 2

SCENE 3

SCENE 4

SCENE 5

SCENE 6

SCENE 7

SCENE 8

PICKING UP
THE PIECES

LEGWORK

CAST OF
SHADOWS

PLAYER
HANDOUTS

