OLDER THAN DIRT

"Older than dirt."

That's a phrase that gets bandied about rather often around me these days. In my youth I never considered old age. I was young and strong. Blessed with the strength of my powerful troll heritage, and fortunate enough not to have the weakness of mind so common among the same. I took my physical abilities and magical powers for granted.

But I am not young any longer. The years as a shadowrunner and a teacher have taken their toll. My body is no longer so responsive. I don't bounce back from injuries or strain the way I used to. My old joints creak and pop every morning when I get out of bed. My mind thankfully is still as sharp as ever, but the magic doesn't come as easily as it used to. I can't just slam my will against the mana and shape spells all day with no thought of the consequences. I tire too easily.

And just as a man who finds that one of his legs is no longer as strong as it used to be, I need a crutch. My magic could use a crutch too.

And so I am in this misbegotten hellhole of a city. Plagued by vermin both metaphysical and metahuman. And all for some very old dirt.

"Presolar grains" is what the scientists call them. Fragments of minerals, crystals, even precious stones that date back to a time before the solar system existed, before the sun itself existed. These fragments of stone fall from the sky in ancient meteorites. And the old Chicago Field Museum held the world's largest collection of them at one time.

Of course that was back before the bugs, before the nuke, before the gangs, and before the FAB. Now these few scant handfuls of precious magical materials are held by a group that calls itself the Astral Space Preservation Society in a place called "Sanctuary." I am certain they don't realize what they hold. Of course if I go to them myself they will suspect, and will demand proper payment. Specifically, they will insist that I join them in their insane quest to construct some sort of "nature preserve" for free spirits. My work is too important to be slowed down by such a silly task. My need is too great. I need my crutch, and to construct it, I need those presolar grains.

And so I will use a stalking horse. I will send an intermediary to negotiate in my place. It seems fitting that as an ex-shadowrunner, I now offer work to some of my former kind. I will send these runners to bargain with the scholars. The idealists will have no reason to suspect these youngsters and should release the grains to them. They will bring me what I want. I will provide them with a not insubstantial amount of nuyen. We all will win.

They really should thank me. This will be, as we said in my day, a "milk run."

INTRODUCTION

SRM 05-04: Liberation is a *Shadowrun Missions* living campaign adventure. Full information on the *Shadowrun Missions* living campaign is available at shadowruntabletop.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 05-04: Liberation 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 05-04: Liberation 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 05-04: Liberation* (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-

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 encourage 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

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.

MISSION SYNOPSIS

In *Liberation*, Lothan the Wise contacts the team to meet him at The Wisest Troll, the talismonger shop he owns and operates. He hires the runners to retrieve a canister that is being stored at the Astral Preservation Society at the Sanctuary (the old Chicago Field Museum) from Dr. Eric Kersh. Lothan expects this to be a simple job, but as always complications arise.

Kersh decides to avail himself of the runners' services and sends them to the Cermak Crater to take some readings with special instruments. At the crater, the runners have to deal with a couple of child-like toxic spirits that love to play with anyone brave (or stupid) enough to come close to their hole in the ground.

Upon returning they discover Kersh under attack.

On top of that, the canister has been stolen by a local gang called the Swamp Thangs. After driving off or defeating the remaining Swamp Thangs, they learn that the canister has been taken to Calumet Swamp, home of the mysterious master of the Thangs. There they must steal the canister back from more members of the game.

Then it's time to call Lothan and get paid. Or so the runners think. The wendigo mosquito shaman known as the Foul One had Lothan's phone tapped and rerouted, and she attempts to get the canister back through guile and trickery, impersonating Lothan. The runners have to see through her deception and defeat her to return it to the real Lothan for their final payday.

SCENE 1:
HIRE LEARNING

SCAN THIS

The shadowrunners are invited to The Wisest Troll talismonger shop where Lothan the Wise hires them to obtain a container of presolar grains from the Chicago Field Museum. Lothan intends to use the grains as powerful telesema to create a focus of unique and great power. Clearly the magical theory is far too complicated for the runners simple minds to comprehend. Lothan is rude and abrasive, but money talks, and there is a very real possibility that the runners can obtain the goods without bloodshed, as the field museum is in the hands of semi-reasonable people.

TELL IT TO THEM STRAIGHT

There's a fetid wind blowing in off Lake Michigan tonight. It's a relief to step inside Miller's Pub and get out of the stench. The bartender gives you a quick once over, then motions toward the back of the pub when he gets a look at a team of professional shadowrunners. You pass the other patrons of this drinking establishment, walk down a few steps to the basement, duck through a beaded curtain, and find yourself in The Wisest Troll—the talismonger's shop owned by Lothan the Wise. Looking over the assorted charms and elixirs for sale you see that you could buy everything from a medallion to ward off insect spirits, to oil guaranteed to make you more handsome, virile, and overall more appealing to everyone. None of those catch your eye as much as the proprietor of the shop. Lothan the Wise—legendary shadowrunner, teacher of magi, and general old curmudgeon—sits at a tall table arranging colorful stones on a chart.

"Excellent of you to arrive." Lothan speaks without so much as a glance in your direction. "The details and magnitude of the undertaking I wish to employ you to perform would doubtless tax your more obtuse members, so I will endeavor to spell things out in as unadorned a manner of speaking as I can. Me want thingy. You get thingy. Me give you many nuyen. Understand? I can go slower if you need me to."

BEHIND THE SCENES

Despite his grating personality, Lothan the Wise has a legitimate offer to make. He is interested in acquiring a canister of presolar grains. Canister number CAT27000 is just another relic of the old Chicago Field Museum, but Lothan believes he can use these presolar grains to construct a unique power focus. As such, he is willing to offer then team 5,000 nuyen up front, and an additional 5,000 nuyen upon delivery of the canister. The team can negotiate for more money. Each net success on an Opposed Negotiation Test will see Lothan increase both sides of the payout by 500 nuyen, up to a limit of 7,000 nuyen on the front and back of the deal (14,000 nuyen total).

Once the bargaining has been completed, Lothan spells out the specifics of this job. "Completion of this task should be rudimentary. Even for a band of ruffians like yourselves. I have already made contact with the Astral Space Preservation Society's leader—a pasty-skinned human named Dr. Eric Kersh. Kersh will meet with you on the steps of the old Chicago Field Museum in one hour. I have no notion of what he may ask of you in exchange for the canister. Should the task prove onerous we can discuss further recompense once you are in possession of the canister. There is one additional stricture I must insist upon. Please do not mention my name to Kersh. He is a well-intentioned if misguided idealist. If he learns that the canister is for me, he will doubtlessly want me to perform some ridiculous act of thaumaturgy in exchange for it. I have no time for his flavor of magical nonsense. As long as Kersh believes that you want the canister, this should be a very simple quest. Get canister CAT27000. Call me at this number when you have it to arrange a proper handoff."

If the runners think to look, be sure to emphasize astral space. The astral plane in Millers is quiet, but full of life. There are sure to be small free spirits and watchers flitting around. The place is an old pub, with all the emotional content that implies. Lothan's shop is equally vibrant. There are all sorts of potent magical auras still lingering from spells that Lothan has recently cast. Anyone who Assenses the stone chart Lothan is working on will realize that this is a powerful Detection Spell Focus. Not exactly portable, but very potent.

In contrast, the Matrix here at Millers is almost silent. There is a cheap Point of Sale system (Device Rating 2) that serves as a cash register and inventory management. Lothan himself doesn't have a commlink. He has an honest to ghost hardwired landline! (This line has been tampered with from the outside. Someone is intercepting Lothan's calls. This will play out in Scene 6 "Payout?")

DEBUGGING

First and foremost, make sure that you play Lothan as a grouchy old troll in this scene. Establishing his personality will be very important in a later scene. Lothan is grating and condescending, certain that he is the smartest person in Chicago, and he uses elaborate and intellectual words and phrases whenever possible to back this belief up. It doesn't help that he is incredibly