

Doc Mudra vs. The Aztec Horror

1. Do the usual saying hello, sitting people down, distributing character sheets, etc.
 - (a) Determine familiarity with standard **GURPS**. Provide quick rule summaries (3d6 for most things, meaning of the attributes, etc.), explanations of the character sheet, etc., as required. Pass out copies of *GURPS Lite* if people seem interested. (It's worth having some around for quick reference in play, anyway.)
 - (b) Determine familiarity with **GURPS Thaumatology** – which will probably be low, the first few times that this scenario is run. Explain that it's a book of alternative magic systems and rules – a giant toolkit, designed to allow GMs to make magic as weird, divergent, and colourful as any campaign may demand. The setting used for this scenario is just one illustration of this, detailed in a separate e23 product for those who are interested.
 - (c) Other **GURPS** books... This scenario is designed to be run without anything except the **Basic Set** and **Thaumatology**, plus ideally **GURPS Thaumatology: The Age of Gold**, although it hopefully contains enough information for GMs to get by without that, at least until it's available. However, it can also be used to promote other books from the line. In particular, the PCs are all carrying guns from either **GURPS High-Tech** or the **GURPS High-Tech: Pulp Guns** PDFs, but all the game details of each weapon are on the character sheets, so those books aren't *required* to run it (though they do provide some background for gun geeks). And, okay, a couple of the characters have perks borrowed from **High-Tech**. These are explained in due course, for people who don't have that book. There are also a few things here and there on character sheets taken from **GURPS Supers**; these are generally either fairly self-explanatory or explained in context.

It's also nice to have a copy of **GURPS Cliffhangers** around for the world background, and **GURPS Aztecs** for reasons that will become clear later in the scenario, but do acknowledge that these are 3rd edition supplements, and they certainly aren't required.

- (d) Determine familiarity with the *Age of Gold* setting – which will be nil in initial demos, so summarise as necessary:

The Age of Gold is a 1930s pulp/early supers setting, with a heavy emphasis on magic. The past history of the world up until about 1920 is effectively identical to our own; although it seems that magic has always worked, a bit, it was never very powerful or reliable, so it didn't change much. However, in 1919, an archaeologist named Flinders Petrie discovered a sample of the Philosopher's Stone in an Egyptian New Kingdom tomb, and magic became at least a semi-serious subject of academic investigation. Since then, it's blossomed, although some people still don't believe in it. Mostly, this means alchemy (mostly in the background, as an academic topic, but with consequences), a bit of ritual magic, and some contact with spirits, some of whom grant the ability to work spell-like effects – but there are also a small number of people who've been *transformed* by magic in all sorts of ways, becoming somewhat superhuman.

So far, magic hasn't changed the world much as compared to our history, although it's having all sorts of odd effects on the Chinese Civil War. The current date for today's game is around 1933; the Great Depression is well under way, Prohibition has recently been repealed, prop planes and airships rule the skies, and so on. But there are a

significant number of what can best be termed pulp adventurers, many of whom know at least something about magic, and a few outright superhumans. Note that the latter correspond to very early comics types; they don't generally wear skin-tight costumes, and they often carry guns. Codes against killing are in a minority, even among the most heroic types. In general, this world is at least as much "realistic", or at least gritty, as four-coloured; getting shot hurts badly at minimum, and will very likely kill people – and only one of the party is bullet-proof, and even he can only stop pistol bullets, knives, etc.; rifle or machine-gun fire will hurt him badly.

- (e) The PC group in this game consists of one low-end "mystery man" (superhuman), the masked adventurer known as Doc Mudra, and four exotic pulp adventurer types who he's organised as his assistants – the Uncanny Four. The Four all know that the Doc is really American millionaire Jerome Chatford, but he wears a mask and preserves a secret identity in the eyes of the public at large; the others don't bother. Some NPCs may have worked out that Chatford is pally with the Uncanny Four, but his secret is generally safe.
 - i. **Doc Mudra** claims to have learned how to unlock the full arcane potential of the human body (or at least some of it) in a lost temple in India; he's impressively strong (though not quite superhuman), can bounce pistol bullets off his chest (he's have to worry a lot about rifles or machine guns, though), and can walk on thin air. However, he has to spend Fatigue Points to activate some of these powers (each expenditure lasts 1 minute; then spend half as much to keep the power going for each additional minute). To back up his strength, he carries a pistol and a heavy Indian mace (treated as a maul for game purposes); note that this requires two hands to use, but his strength is sufficient (150% of weapon ST) to prevent it becoming unready after he swings it.
 - ii. **Major George Gregory**, a British big game hunter who can detect and perceive spirits, understand their emotions and psychology, and act as a medium, channelling their communications. He also has a number of appropriate skills, and he carries a very impressive high-power hunting rifle; this might be a good time to point out that the latter has somewhat limited ammunition capacity, and to explain about reloading times. He also has the perk, "Armorer's Gift (Rifle)"; this lets him strip down or rebuild his rifle in thirty seconds flat, under any circumstances, with a Guns (Rifle) skill roll.
 - iii. The enigmatic **Irina Fedorevna**, known as "the White Russian Flame," who claims that her powers over fire and cold derive from her contacts with the spirit world. She doesn't like over-using these, though, for reasons she doesn't discuss much; fortunately, she also has other skills. Irina is an exile Tsarist Russian who always dresses in white furs and black silks, and whose "powers" actually consist of a handful of **GURPS** spells – which aren't usually available as such in this setting, but Irina uses "spirit-assisted magic", which makes them available, with drawbacks. There are a few notes for her player regarding how it works. The "Quick Sheathe" perk allows her to sheathe the relevant weapon in effectively zero time, with a successful Fast-Draw roll.
 - iv. **Pierre De Rocheford**, a brilliant French inventor and aviator, whose creations include the Amazing Helix-Plane, the group's usual transport. Pierre is effectively a Tech Level ahead of most of the world, although his ideas about technology are a bit weird; for example, the Amazing Helix-Plane, his greatest invention, has the capabilities of a TL7 helicopter, but it looks like a 1930s passenger plane fuselage, truncated and attached to a pair of rotors borrowed from a Leonardo da Vinci

drawing. Pierre buys the Helix-Plane as an Ally, mainly because that makes it affordable with points, while his Gadgeteer advantage means that he can invent and build new machines and stuff, but on realistic time-scales (taking weeks or months) – still, it justifies some of his “futuristic” gear. His Inventor! skill lets him invent, build, and maintain almost any sort of technology, and stands in for pretty well any “practical technology” skill, while Pilot! means that he can fly anything and shoot any aircraft-mounted weapon. Lastly, Alchemy and Weird Science reflect his interest in bizarre theories. Oh, and the others will know that he’s a bit of a nerd.

- v. **Tsai Wu Tsi**, a Chinese sorceress. Along with a long list of languages and a variety of skills, the innocuous-looking Wu Tsi can use a wide range of fairly impressive ritual magic effects. However, these take some time to make work, and have built-in risks and problems, so she needs to be a bit careful with this option.

The Four know each other moderately well by now, but may not know all each other’s secrets. Doc Mudra has brought them together to help him investigate the mysteries of magic; he’s still mostly interested in pure research, in *principle*, but when they find magic being used for evil, which is quite a lot of the time, Doc Mudra and the Uncanny Four are the sort of people who’ll try to stop it. Also, some of the Four have enemies, and the Doc has a sister who occasionally needs helping out of various sorts of supernatural trouble.

- (f) Go over everybody’s character sheet further if they have any questions. They all have some exotic abilities, so it’s worth making sure that they’re reasonably clear about how these work, and that they’re fairly clear on all the basic **GURPS** stuff.
2. The Set-Up: Jerome Chatford is having breakfast in his family’s home in Chicago when his sister, who is home for the summer vacation, snorts at something she’s seen in the *Chicago Tribune*. “More mystical claptrap!” she declares. “If I didn’t have to be getting back to the college to arrange those teaching schedules, I’d have a good mind to get down there and find out which drunken Mexican peasant mistook a stray goat for a monster.” She throws the paper down and picks up her coffee cup to take it back to her room.

The story which attracted her attention is obvious:

Monsters on the Rampage, Mexican Provincials Allege

from our Mexico City correspondent

Reports from the small Mexican provincial town of Maguarichi indicate a curious and perhaps startling manifestation of dangerous wildlife hitherto considered mythical. However, government officials insist that the concerns expressed by the people of this quiet northern province are exaggerated and possibly the products of superstitious imaginations.

The first indication of problems in outlying parts of the state of Chihuahua reached the capital two days since, in the form of confused appeals to the Ministry of Justice for assistance following a series of wild animal attacks on townsfolk. Such matters would surely rarely be considered worthy of attention by officials above the level of municipal police captains, and the only explanation for an appeal to Mexico City might lie in the numbers of the fatalities claimed. However, the reports which reached the Mexican press employed terms which implied, not merely the action of some injured and anthropophagous mountain lion or enraged wild bull, but the presence of monsters out of legend.

The national government appears unwilling to respond to these reports in any haste, however. Only a cynic might associate this steady caution with the involvement of towns

such as Maguarichi in the *Cristero* War of a few years past, but those same revolts, which pitched the authority of the secular government against the Catholic faith of many of the masses, have left law enforcement in such remote parts spread thin and little liked by the ordinary, pious peasantry. Suggestions of monstrous incursions, even in these strange times, are in danger of being shrugged aside by ruling officials. As yet, indeed, no strong response to these tales has been announced.

(Notes: There's a handout available with the above text. While place and personal names used in this scenario are often drawn from reality, many of them are being used for entirely fictional material; don't try researching them too deeply, and do apologise to anyone who turns out to know Mexico better than the author!)

The Doc should have his curiosity tweaked by all this – and then there's the threat of Miranda heading out and sticking her head right into the maw of a monster... (The last is a red herring; Miranda is indeed due back at the college soon, and can't get to Mexico in time to get involved in the scenario – unless the GM wants to complicate things a bit more, of course. Still, this possibility should help motivate the Doc.)

Incidentally, a bit of background knowledge that's certainly easy enough for anyone to find out with a Research roll: the *Cristero* War of 1926-9 was an uprising against the anti-Catholic provisions of the Mexican constitution of 1917. It was resolved diplomatically, with the state effectively not enforcing the rules against church power in the constitution, but a fair amount of hostility and friction may remain.

3. The Amazing Helix-Plane can reach Mexico with a few refuelling stops along the way; Pierre will need to plot a route and send a few telegrams to confirm that fuel will be available as required, but the group can be down there in a couple of days. The Helix-Plane also has the virtue of not needing a proper landing field. The Uncanny Four can all be assumed to have passports, and anyway, the group can bypass a lot of that tiresome officialdom on a trip like this; Doc Mudra can generally get by with a combination of staying in the background, wearing a mask, and throwing money at the problem. Alternatively, he could travel down there as Chatford, and keep Doc Mudra's activities quiet and secret.

A bigger concern might be the fact that none of the party speak Spanish. They'll just have to hire some help, and hope that the locals in Maguarichi include enough folk who can get by in English.

Anyway, the trip south passes uneventfully. It can also give the PCs the chance to chat about stuff, think up ideas, etc.

4. Maguarichi turns out to be a sleepy northern Mexican provincial town, really no more than a village, nestling in the foothills of the mountains. It has no railway access, and the roads in and out are poor, but a moderate-sized river flowing out of the mountains seems to water a few fields quite well. It also has one half-decent hotel where the PCs can put up.

The locals will be happy to see anyone who seems willing to help them with their current troubles; they're evidently scared and worried about something. The hotel proprietor speaks enough English to talk to the PCs; the town priest speaks a few words, but is currently spending most of his time in his church, praying; there's also the son of the local store-keeper, a young man named Miguel, who's learned some English to help with purchasing trips with his father, and who has some ambitions in life. He'll act as interpreter and guide in exchange for a modest payment. There is also a reporter from a Mexico City newspaper, sent up here to look into the reports of monsters; he spends most of his time in the local

cantina, drinking tequila and cursing the superstitions of the peasantry, in English if anyone joins him.

(The local big land-owner, Don Jose Pedraza, speaks English, but is less likely to be helpful at this point. His son, Rogiero, also speaks English, and will be a bit more friendly, but is very guarded around people.)

Miguel can fill the PCs in on the details of the back-story. A couple of weeks ago, late one night, the town was briefly enveloped in a strange glowing mist for a few minutes. This worried people for a while, but when nothing much followed, most of the locals put it down as a freak fog, and went on with their lives. Then, two days later, two different people who'd been out near the river failed to return home. A search party went out, including the town's policeman – and they were attacked by a pair of giant serpents, confidently identified by some of the witnesses as *acoatl*, legendary man-eating monsters. Two people were killed; everyone else, including the policeman, fled.

The policeman declared the intention of collecting help to deal with this problem, and rode off to the nearest large town. (The consensus was that he had the sense to know that he was a poor shot with his revolver.) However, during the night while he was away, a different attack took place; old Porfirio was making his way home from the cantina when *something* came out of the darkness. His wife swears that she saw a demon, specifically something she named a *tzitzime*, tear him to pieces. She's not a very coherent witness – and she's permanently holed up in the church now – but the bloodstains on the street seemed to confirm that something pretty awful had happened.

When the policemen returned the next day, they were naturally very concerned at this, and undertook to search out the killer. However, nothing happened for two days; then, on the third, they were patrolling the streets in the evening when, to judge by the screams and gunshots, they too met the monster. The next morning, only bloodstains remained.

By now, naturally, nobody was going out much. However, after another few days, Don Jose's *home* was attacked, seemingly by the demons. Details are unclear, but the Don claims that his wife's devout prayers and the guns in the hands of himself and his servants put paid to the attack. There's no sign of monster remains, mind, but the servants back up his story, and there are what appear to be some big claw-marks in the woodwork of the house.

Which is where things stand. No one is going out much at night – indeed, half the population spends its time in the church, and many of the rest join them after dark – and everyone is waiting for somebody else to solve the problem.

5. What's Going On

A few years ago, a radical activist working for the Communist International came through this part of Mexico, trying to drum up support for his cause. He was run out of town thanks to the influence of the devoutly Catholic, highly conservative Don Jose, and sent back a report on his unsuccessful efforts, holding Maguarichi up as the quintessence of useless peasant superstition.

This report remained on file in Moscow until recently. Then, a “metapsychic researcher” named Andrei Volkovich happened across it while looking for somewhere he could test his new invention – and offered to show how “metapsychic munitions” could be “derived from the psyches of even the most unenlightened proletariat and deployed against the oppressive classes”. (Volkovich had a slightly bad feeling about his position in the Russian system, and was looking for a way out of Russia for the worst case situation, but he was primarily pretty confident about his invention.) His supervisors decided to give him the chance,

getting him out from under their feet while putting the tests of what was already looking like a dangerous device at a safe distance, and despatched him to Mexico, where local Comintern agents were instructed to provide him with assistance.

Volkhovitch's invention, the Manifestation Machine, is actually a weird science demon-summoning device – or a psychic projector that can tap the ambient metapsychic field, if you use Volkhovitch's own jargon. (A lot of its internal workings are actually *alchemical*, including vacuum tubes arranged in astrological configurations, connections made of rare metals, and so on.) It tends to conjure up dangerous stuff from the recesses of the imaginations of the nearby populations; where the ensuing mass and energy come from are matters of abstruse theory. Volkhovitch is still perfecting the control systems (actually, he probably doesn't have much chance of really *controlling* much that the machine may summon), but he can place the results moderately precisely over a range of a few miles, preferably near the population whose minds he's tapping.

He's currently holed up in a cave in the mountains overlooking the village with two of the Mexican revolutionaries who've been assigned to protect him, along with a radio set. These three don't have much clue what this foreigner is up to, but they've been told that he's important to the revolution, and that he's working on a weapon to use against the exploitative classes. They'll protect him diligently, but not really fanatically.

The "glowing fog" described by the villagers was generated by the machine when it first fired up and Volkhovitch calibrated it for local conditions; it may reappear at any point where he's adjusting the Machine, for dramatic effect.

The other crucial factor at this point is that Volkhovitch has a spy in the town – Rogiero Pedraza. The college-educated Rogiero despises his father for a superstitious bully who drove his mother to an early grave (and frankly, he has a point with this), and has become a devout convert to International Communism. He's got another radio set hidden in his room, and he reports to Volkhovitch on the success of each stage of the experiment. He doesn't have much time for the local peasantry, feeling that they put up with his father too willingly and go along with his "superstitions"; although he feels a bit bad about the deaths of innocents, he's accepted that it's a price worth paying. However, after the demon attack on the family home, he was a little unnerved, so the plan is that he'll be in town on the night when Volkhovitch launches the next phase – the Proletarian Metapsychic Revolution, which is going to involve a horde of *tzitzime* assaulting and destroying the hacienda...

6. Developing the Plot

From here on, a lot depends on how the PCs decide to tackle these problems. Very good Occultism rolls, clever research, or a lot of careful cross-examination of the villagers, can turn up information about the two types of monster, including the *acoatl*'s habit of leaving a pit full of fish near the river as bait for human victims. Tracking down and killing those things might be a good start; wandering around the town at night might draw out a couple of *tzitzime*. However, only people who the villagers know are there will be attacked by the latter; it's a psychic thing, remember. Unfortunately, because the monsters are all actually psychic constructs/spirits wearing material forms, any time one is killed, they just vanish in a cloud of vile-smelling smoke. PCs with Occultism will know that this is pretty normal for demons; anyone with Thaumatology will be able to talk about "psychic constructs of the id", and will mention Dr Jung's theories. The only odd thing here is that demons are usually sapient, and most are at least a bit devious – but the *acoatl* just seem to be wild animals, and the *tzitzime* are being pretty crude in their tactics (though this does match the old Aztec myths in both cases).

The village priest is an elderly, rather quiet type who survived the Cristero War period by keeping his head down, and whose only answer to the current problem is for everyone to pray a lot. Don Jose will be pretty disdainful of any solution that doesn't involve prayer (although he'll acknowledge that his prayers were assisted by his and his trusted servants' shotguns a few nights ago); he's arrogant, slightly xenophobic, and fanatically religious in a rather primitive sort of way. If people do get talking to him, he'll say something like "We saw off those *Communist* rabble a few years ago, so now the devil is sending a larger challenge – but we'll see off his demons too!" However, his plan amounts to "let them come, then pray at them and shoot them". He is openly disdainful of his son, who doesn't say much. If and when his hacienda is assaulted a second time, it will actually be overwhelmed by weight of numbers (there weren't actually very many *tzitzime* the first time round), unless the PCs intervene; fortunately, the attack will be preceded by another glowing green fog effect, which may alert people.

Tracking the cause of this stuff is a matter for PC ingenuity; there are various lines of enquiry to take, and the PCs might try some kind of magic. For one thing, although Major Gregory can't simply see the connection between the creatures and the Manifestation Machine from the ground, he could see it from the air when the new attack on the hacienda is triggered. Also, Rogiero Pedraza isn't exactly a professional spy, and may drop clues if the PCs seem to need them. (Ingenuity should be rewarded, but this is a demo scenario, so clueless players should be given *some* way to wrap things up.) The creatures themselves aren't very communicative, and the *acoatl* are just wild animals, but if the *tzitzime* are somehow mind-probed, it becomes clear that they were recently formed, "drawn down from the sky" in their terms, and then *directed*, rather to their irritation.

7. The Last Confrontation

If and when they're tracked down, the people behind all this trouble will defend themselves. The Mexican communists will fight quite fiercely, but wouldn't mind finding an escape route; they'd like to be around and able to help when the revolution comes. Still, they've got rifles. Volkhovich is less use in ordinary combat, but he may try to focus the Manifestation Machine on his opponents at point blank range. Unfortunately, it isn't really up to this, and it won't solve his problem. It may even manifest Volkhovich's own nightmares – shadowy figures, seemingly giants in trenchcoats and fur hats, who'll surround him and try to crush the life out of him.

Note, however, that Volkhovich has his full share of mad scientist politeness, and he'll happily provide fellow scientists with an exposition if provoked. He really mostly wants his genius acknowledged, but he's severely lacking in human empathy. He might even *consider* defecting, but he's not stupid; he knows that summoning demons to kill people isn't going to go unpunished, whereas if he's captured, there's at least an outside chance that local revolutionaries or his bosses in Moscow will rescue him in order to make use of his genius again in future.