

G U R P S<sup>®</sup>

BEST OF

Volume 2

**PYRAMID<sup>®</sup>**



Campaign Settings,  
Optional Rules,  
and Adventures  
from *Pyramid Magazine*

J. Miracola '95

**STEVE JACKSON GAMES**



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This book reprints 33 more of the best *GURPS* items from the print issues of *Pyramid Magazine*, updated by editor Steven Marsh.

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- ▲ *The Unity War* – a sci-fi universe of secrets within secrets.
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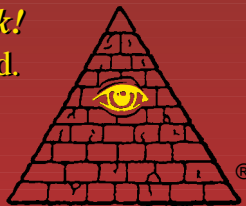
- ▲ *The Yalkani* – turtle-like aliens with a genetic skeleton in their closet.
- ▲ *Unlimited Mana* – where magic is mighty yet costly.
- ▲ *More Power!* – revealing the true utility of a *Grimoire* spell.
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*GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition, Revised* and *Compendium I: Character Creation* are required to use this book in a *GURPS* campaign. The settings and ideas here can be used with *any* roleplaying system.

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## ABOUT GURPS

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*Pyramid* (at [www.sjgames.com/pyramid/](http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid/)). Our online magazine includes new *GURPS* rules and articles. It also covers *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Traveller*, *World of Darkness*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and many more top games – and other Steve Jackson Games releases like *In Nomine*, *INWO*, *Car Wars*, *Toon*, *Ogre Miniatures*, and more. *Pyramid* subscribers also have access to playtest files online!

*New supplements and adventures.* *GURPS* continues to grow, and we'll be happy to let you know what's new. A current catalog is available for an SASE. Or check out our website (below).

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The *GURPS Best of Pyramid 2* web page is at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/pyramid2/](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/books/pyramid2/).

## PAGE REFERENCES

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set* – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Page references that begin with CI indicate *GURPS Compendium I*. Other references are CW for *GURPS Cyberworld*, CY for *GURPS Cyberpunk*, G for *GURPS Grimoire*, M for *GURPS Magic*, PYi for *GURPS Best of Pyramid 1*, RO for *GURPS Robots*, and UT for *GURPS Ultra-Tech*. For a full list of abbreviations, see p. CI181 or the updated web list at [www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html](http://www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html).

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# INTRODUCTION

We live in an era where we write emails to people, then grow impatient if we don't get a reply in an hour. (Or at least *I* do.) But when *Pyramid* #1 came out in 1993, instantaneous communications were nowhere near as prevalent as today. To put it in perspective, *GURPS Cyberworld* came out at the same time as that first issue; in the information on the first page it invites folks to call up Steve Jackson Games' BBS, allowing connection speeds of up to 2400 baud! (To be fair, that text seems to be older, as the first issue of *Pyramid* also says that connection speeds of 9600 and 14.4k baud are possible. Then again, the *Cyberworld* universe of the year 2140 postulated the existence of mass storage CDs that can hold 10 gigs of data, or about 60% of what today's DVD can hold . . . proving yet again the difference between science fiction and science fact is that science fiction is believable.)

Anyway, in the early days of *Pyramid* it was difficult to determine what would emerge as "classics." Oh, sure, there were some articles that stood out early on; "The Hole," for example, was from that very first issue, and it would've been shocking if it didn't spark the imagination of our fledgling readership. But the reaction towards other pieces must have been surprising; "Unlimited Mana," for example, still ranks in our archives (as of this writing) as the number one rated article!

But now, with the passage of time and the clear eyes of experience, we're able to see what other classics from the paper days of *Pyramid* deserve to be brought into TL8. And choosing these articles hasn't been easy; there were a ton of neat articles crammed into 30 issues. (Unlike, say, my gaming notes from the early '90s . . . where phrases like "exploded his very brain" and made-up songs like "Metagirl" still haunt me. And I won't even talk about my first fantasy



roleplaying mage named Zappo Zam.) And, like *Best of Pyramid Volume 1*, we've gone over the articles and made sure they have been updated to take into account whatever new developments have happened in the *GURPS* line. (Remember the horrible dark ages before *GURPS Compendium I* and *II*?) And we've even added some completely new material in a couple of places.

The theme of this volume seems to be portability; there are at least dozens of ideas, scenarios, characters, rules, and worlds that will fit in many campaigns. We have a planet where robots rule, a pawn shop with a sinister secret, a city steeped in the madness of a legacy of evil, a diplomatic first contact in space, and a near-future of unraveling conspiracies. We have a plethora of cursed items, waiting to corrupt the greedy or unsuspecting. We have bottomless pits and U-Store-Its. And what game *wouldn't* benefit from a time-traveling hotel? For practically any time, any place, any background (sound familiar?) there should be *something* you can scavenge for your own games. And most of these ideas can be used whole cloth for many campaigns. (I must confess, however, that if the number of back issue articles is any indication, the bleak future of cyberpunk worlds must have seemed more likely in the early '90s than today. But at least they aren't outdated, like the scads of near-now nuclear holocaust games from the '80s.)

We're happy to look back fondly on the legacy of the paper days of *Pyramid*. I can only hope folks will look back in 2008 at the tenth anniversary of the electronic version of *Pyramid* with such fond memories. And I also hope that these articles – in our opinion, more of the best that *Pyramid* has to offer – will help you create your own fond memories.

And many years from now, you may write your friends an email to reminisce about these campaign settings, weird artifacts, and adventures. And when you do, the impatience of the entire universe will have advanced such that you'll presume your friends have been devoured by wolverines when they haven't replied in 15 minutes.

– Steven Marsh



# The Intercession

by John M. Ford

Every conflict needs a neutral ground. No matter how absolute and vicious the enmity between sides, there has to be a place where contact can safely be made. The Intercession is that place.

Its usual appearance is as a small inn or hotel, appropriate to the universe in which it appears. In the standard-issue fantasy world, it would be an inn with ceiling beams, wooden tables stained by decades of spilled ale, tiny rooms up the wooden staircase, past the swing-rated chandeliers. In a contemporary setting, it is a small townhouse hotel, or country bed-and-breakfast, with a discreet sign on the door – no neon, no Michelin rating, no credit cards. In space opera, it might be a hazy dive on the edge of the starport, or a self-contained orbital platform. If the war has been really vicious, it could be behind an inconspicuous door in the bombed-out shell of a once-grand hotel. And so on.

The important thing about The Intercession is not its appearance (which has been known to change, anyway); it is that, inside its door, all active forms of conflict are suspended. This applies not only to physical violence, but to such actions as non-consensual telepathy. Reading minds with the permission of the subject is allowed, and even encouraged. Most weapons must be surrendered upon entering, though no physical search is involved. This isn't a test of ingenuity in defining "weapons;" it doesn't apply to such "normal" items as eating knives. Members of cultures that require personal armament may keep it . . . the truth is, it won't do them any good anyway.

No one seems to know if the neutrality of the place is simply by mutual agreement among all the parties who use it, or if it is enforced by a Higher Power. The

rules are normally observed without problems; people who find The Intercession, or are sent there, either understand already what it's for or learn very quickly.



As the saying goes, however, there's always two percent who don't get the word, and an awful lot of them are player characters. People who insist on attempting violence tend to find Murphy smiling upon them especially brightly: guns misfire, swords get stuck in scabbards, laser optics are dirty and batteries are dead, spellcasters get the hiccups, blunt instruments hang up on the drapes, ninjas trip on loose boards, vampires get an awful toothache . . .

In a campaign where opponents are normally beyond truce, such as *In Nomine*, it may be necessary to clearly state that something beyond

either side keeps the peace, that the truce is not an invitation to clever treachery. (The motto above the bar, taken from Dante, is "This Has Been Willed Where What is Willed Must Be." Wherever that is.) There are, of course, limits: Cthulhu isn't going to show up for a quiet brandy with his mortal opponents, but some of his human minions might. (Especially if they had just lost control of one of their summonings. Again.)

*Vampire: The Masquerade* already contains a version of this idea, as "Elysium." In a *Vampire* campaign, The Intercession might exist as a point of contact between Kindred and others – Lupines, for instance, or even vampire-hunters. Perhaps the Government's Weird Incidents Investigative Team goes there to meet Kindred, the joke being that the vampires are preserving the Masquerade by pretending to be the Illuminati, or extraterrestrials . . .

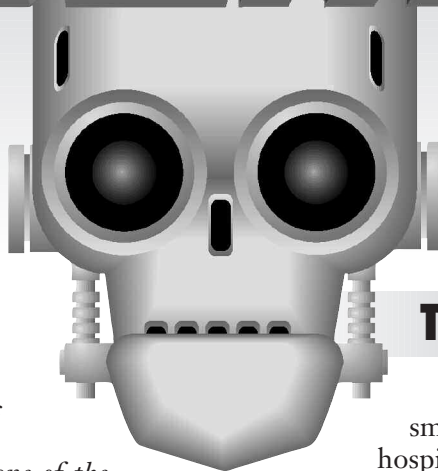
It is generally assumed that people in The Intercession tell the truth, or at least what they believe to be the truth. This can be especially important in, say, an espionage campaign, where everyone is normally lying about their knowledge and intentions. It is up to the GM, however, whether honesty is enforced, normally observed, or purely optional.

The Intercession is operated by four people. As with the decor, their appearance fits the local background: human in a human world, a mix of species in a fantasy or SF setting. (They are described here as human merely to set the general tone; feel free to modify appropriately.) All can speak any language the visitors know, including sign languages. They display telepathy only if there is absolutely no other way for visitors to communicate.

# CYBEREARTH

A CAMPAIGN WORLD  
FOR **GURPS** ROBOTS  
AND OTHER SF GAMES

BY JAMES L. CAMBIAS



*Sir Charles A-237 made his way cautiously down the filthy Whitechapel street, peering through the sooty fog with his infrared cameras.*

*An aged beggar lay slumped against one of the crumbling tenements. As Sir Charles passed, she held out a rusty claw. "Alms, sir? Alms for the poor? Spare a few chips for a soldier's widow?"*

*She was no more a soldier's widow than he was, but Sir Charles tossed her a couple of processor chips and hurried on his way. In the next block he could see the police searchlights turning the fog into a glowing opaque mass. As Sir Charles approached, a constable moved to intercept him. "Sorry, sir. Police investigation. There's been a murder done."*

*"You'd better get those cameras checked, Wiggins," said Sir Charles. "Or have you forgotten me so soon?"*

*"Strike me pink! Sir Charles A-237! Beg your pardon, sir. I'd no idea it was you. Right this way – Inspector B-951's waiting."*

*In the center of the lit area the Inspector rolled back and forth impatiently. At the sound of Sir Charles' footsteps he swung all his eyes to look at the celebrated amateur detective. "Good evening, Sir Charles."*

*"Evening, Inspector. Your message said something about a murder?"*

*"This way. It's a bad one." The burly inspector rumbled over to an alley. At a gesture from him, the constables removed the blanket covering something on the cobblestones. Sir Charles stiffened as it was revealed.*

*There, surrounded by a pool of oil, was the body of a robot, completely dismantled. Even the subsystems were disassembled, and the memory storage unit was completely destroyed.*

*"Is it – ?" Inspector B-951 ventured.*

*"Indeed," said Sir Charles. "The Ripper has struck again!"*

The planet CybEarth is a campaign setting for use with **GURPS Robots** or other science-fiction role-playing games. Game Masters can also incorporate it into other campaigns as the setting for a one-shot adventure.



## The Planet

CybEarth is a medium-sized planet smaller than Earth, with an environment hospitable to humans. Its diameter is 6,000 kilometers, its surface gravity is 0.65 g, and its day is only ten hours long. The planet's atmosphere is composed of nitrogen and oxygen, with a surface pressure about the same as Earth's. Oceans cover approximately half the surface, giving CybEarth a land area slightly greater than that of Earth. The planet has fairly advanced animal and plant life, with creatures similar to mammals and birds. It has no indigenous intelligent species.

## History

CybEarth was settled over a century ago by an organization called the Retrogressive Society. The Retrogressives were dissatisfied with the pace of life in interstellar civilization, and believed that humans in past cultures had lived better and happier lives. They wanted to establish a place where people could enjoy the lifestyles practiced in bygone centuries. Since many of the Retrogressives were quite wealthy, the organization could afford to purchase an uninhabited world, where they put their beliefs into practice. The colonists named the planet Clio, after the ancient Greek goddess of history.

There were initially seven groups in the colony. The Retropolitans yearned to recreate the exciting days of the 20th century, with private automobiles, 2-D movies and frequent warfare. The Neo-Victorians wanted to live in the world of the 19th century, when steam was king and the Queen was not amused. A set of Shogun Restorationists hoped to duplicate the society of Japan before westernization. Cavaliers engaged in swordplay and swashbuckling worthy of D'Artagnan. Medievalists desired a world of castles, jousting tournaments and courtly love. The Athenoids dreamed of a Greek-style city-state populated by philosophers. And the Pseudo-Primitives wanted to get back to humanity's origins as hunter-gatherers.

# Unlimited MANA

By S. John Ross

Standard *GURPS* magic is “tactical”; mages can create dozens of small effects in a given day – but very few (if any) world-shattering miracles. Manipulations of mana, the force behind spells, leaves sorcerers drained and weak. Thus, wizards are limited by their knowledge (which determines their flexibility) and their physical stamina. “Powerful” wizards are wizards that know more spells at higher levels than others.

Absent from this basic structure is the concept of *Raw Power* – wizards that can crack a castle in half or drown an army in flames.

Fantasy novels which feature such levels of power rarely have mages that get “tired out” by magic. Instead, extreme effects threaten the fabric of the universe, creating a situation in which wizards can create true miracles in times of need, but do not use their powers frivolously. When their companions ask for more magic, they will drone cryptically, “To draw too deeply on my Gift can lead to madness and death. Do not demand of me what you do not comprehend.”

Fantasy writers need character balance as much as GMs do. While it's exiting to establish that a sorcerer can wreak serious havoc when needed, it's boring to let him overshadow the rest of the characters. That cryptic doubletalk exists as a handy plot device, no less than the wizard himself.

This approach to magic has been left untouched in gaming, and for

good reason. It's easy for a writer to create a wizard that will be prudent with his arcane wisdom. Trying to get an ambitious fantasy gamer (even a well-meaning one) to do the same is risky at best. Fortunately the *GURPS* magic system is flexible enough to permit Unlimited Mana that will balance in *any* fantasy campaign, even the lowest of “low fantasy!”

## The Power Tally

“Unlimited” isn't a mana level, it's a mana *type*. In an Unlimited Mana (Umana) campaign, spells do not cause fatigue.

When a mage casts a spell, he should record the cost in a running tally, instead of taking the cost from his ST score. All normal rules for costs (skill reduction, etc.) remain in force.

*Example: Magus Wiltshire finds himself caught in a besieged city. He has not used magic in a while, and feels that the present emergency justifies it. In his attempts to escape unnoticed, he casts a huge (cost 21) Mass Sleep spell on a group of guards. Three guards are unaffected, and Wiltshire, furious, casts an Entombment spell on one of them, which increases his tally by 10 points to 31. Two guards remain . . .*

## Threshold and Calamities

Every mage has a Threshold (*Thresh*) score – this defines the safe limits of his magic. If his tally remains at or below his Thresh, everything is fine. If his tally exceeds

his Thresh, Bad Things can happen, and the mage must roll on the Calamity Table (p. 63). The “default” Thresh score is 30.

“Calamity Checks” are made by rolling 3d, and adding 1 for every full 5 points by which Thresh has been exceeded. The spell that first brings the mage's tally over Thresh triggers a check. After that, *any* spell cast by the mage (even those that cost no energy) will also trigger new Calamity Checks at the current level of excess.

Calamities take effect immediately, but their nature may not always be apparent to the mage (see the table for details). Calamities do not normally cause the spell to fail (but see results 29+).

Note that any Calamity that refers to the “spell cost” means a number equal to the energy cost of the spell that triggered the Calamity.

*Example, Part II: Magus Wiltshire, a normal (Thresh 30) mage, exceeded his Thresh when he cast the Entombment spell. This requires a Calamity Check. Since Wiltshire exceeded his Thresh only by 1, there is no modifier to the roll. If he decides to entomb the other two guards, each new casting will trigger a fresh calamity, and modifiers will begin to apply.*

## The Recovery Rate

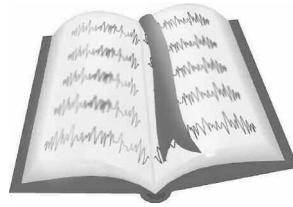
Once per day, the mage's Tally is healed by an amount equal to his Recovery Rate (RR). The “default” RR score is 8, with recovery occurring at sunrise.



# THE SEVEN BOOKS OF ALEXANDER LACAN

by John M. Ford

While Alexander Lacan (1823-1892?) is usually described as an “occultist,” he would have rejected the term. He considered himself a scientist – he preferred the archaic term “natural philosopher” – and believed that nothing was hidden to those with the perseverance, and the courage, to look. He wrote: “As Man has finally begun to learn that there must not be one law for the Prince and another for the poor man, one law for the Englishman and another for the Hindoo, so there is not one rule for the Gods and another for Men. What They have done, we may do. Nay, can do, must and shall do.”



Lacan’s disappearance was never solved. Most people believed that he had died on Dartmoor, in whose bogs and wilds many people have vanished, either by accident or murdered by a vagrant. Skeptics claimed that, financially exhausted by his quest and ashamed at its failure (for even those who considered Lacan a fool never doubted his intelligence), he chose to vanish, either a suicide or an exile under an assumed name, possibly in America. A few true believers insisted that he had completed his search and been translated to a higher existence, perhaps to Deity itself, and that the Seven Books of Knowledge had then been scattered across the world, waiting for the next questor.

Lacan lived in Devonshire, England, near Dartmoor, where his experiments with chemistry and electricity would disturb no one. His source of income is not precisely known, though he certainly never lacked for money. He was not a complete recluse, appearing once or twice a month in the nearest pub, the Star and Compass, for dinner and political conversation – radical, but not beyond the radicalism of the times.

The Star and Compass was where he was last seen, in April of 1892. No one seemed to notice anything unusual on that visit. When he failed to appear for three months, a constable visited his house. It was empty, and had clearly been so for some time. The library, laboratories, and astronomical observatory, all quite valuable, were apparently intact, and most of Lacan’s clothes were still present. A manuscript journal was found in the study, but it offered no clue – at least, no practical clue – to his disappearance.

Lacan’s Journals of a Free Mind were published in 1923, the hundredth anniversary of his birth, by Editions du Bord, a small “mystic arts” publisher in Paris. Editions du Bord closed in 1940, leaving very few records; the best guess is that between 100 and 200 copies of the Journals were printed.

According to the Journals, around 1860 Lacan became interested in the “lost” writings of the natural philosophers of the past. He developed the idea that there were seven volumes of extraordinary knowledge, lost or deliberately hidden away through human ignorance and fear. Any one of the books could make the owner immensely powerful, if that person were willing to apply its contents; with all seven, there would be nothing separating a mortal from the Gods. Lacan always referred to “the Gods” in the plural, and he seems to have believed that they were mortal beings (not necessarily human) who had mastered the arts he tried to learn.

## The Seven Books

*The Sforza Codex.* A notebook of Leonardo da Vinci, containing working diagrams for machines far beyond the cannon platforms and underpowered flying machines of his known work: death rays, robots and computers, nuclear explosives, a time machine. In da Vinci’s handwriting – mirror-writing, in Italian, naturally – and unique.

*Further Investigations of Andreas Vesalius.* Vesalius was the great student and illustrator of human anatomy, working at a time when human dissection was officially forbidden. This book describes his experimental work in the reconstruction and animation of dead bodies; Lacan may have acquired it from the library of the late Dr. Victor Frankenstein. In Latin, though Vesalius’ illustrations are famously clear. There may be as many as eight copies.

*Elements,* by the Comte de Saint-Germain. A practical manual of alchemical transformation. More than a recipe for making gold, it includes the secrets of chemical immortality, invisibility, and control over all properties of matter and energy. While the author is known to have lived in pre-Revolutionary France, this book is much older; either “Saint-Germain” was an immortal, or simply appended his name to a work he inherited. In Latin; one, or possibly two, copies.

*Beyond the Pillars of Hercules.* An anonymous account of a voyage to Atlantis, possibly used as a source for Plato’s writings on the subject. So much has been claimed for Atlantean science that its exact contents cannot be guessed at; some believe that it is actually an atlas and gazeteer of lost places of power. Written in classical Greek; one copy only.

# Pawnshop

By S. John Ross

**P**awnshop is an Illuminated/Weird Occult adventure for a small group of modern adventurers of 50-150 points each. The text assumes that the heroes are known for their interest in the unusual or otherworldly, and that they are either “for hire” or have sufficient reputation to be sought out when an unusual case presents itself. The adventure is set in and around Washington, D.C. (in Georgetown, specifically), but can easily be transplanted to any modern city. Only the *GURPS Basic Set* is necessary for play.

Note that one or two adventurers with some low-power Psi or magic are appropriate to the genre, following the suggestions for “psychic investigators” on p. B165 (sidebar). In fact, the GM may wish to encourage one PC to have a little Psychometry, as this power is useful for feeding the party information the GM wants them to have.

## Background

Washington, D.C.’s Georgetown district is known for its “college town” atmosphere – art galleries, alternative theaters, expensive shops, and a strong streak of new-age sensibility permeate the northwestern end of M Street. Weekend evenings find the streets crowded and festive, and the local intellectuals retreat into coffeehouse booths to savagely ponder verities over tense games of chess.

Just out of reach of the lights of M Street is a tiny shop of the kind that can only thrive in this kind of atmosphere: Emperor Baxley’s Pawn Shop, possibly the only pawn shop in the country specializing in occult paraphernalia. Next to the predictable stacks of stereos and glass cases of cheap firearms, the casual browser will spot hand-painted Tarot decks, seemingly ancient manuscripts (carefully crafted by a local artist), crystal balls, pewter pentagrams, and suggestive candlesticks engraved with pagan slogans. The choicest items – the truly unusual – “Emperor” Baxley saves for himself, or puts on display without a price tag. Karl Baxley profits from the occasional poverty of the local new-agers, and over the years has accumulated a few items worthy of the attention of the Secret Masters. One of them – an alien artifact meant to be used as a communications device – is being used by Baxley to control minds at a distance, and to commit murder.

## The Plea for Help

The PCs are contacted by Karen Kessler, a resident of Crystal City, Virginia, with a request for their services as investigators of the unusual. She will call first, and request a meeting in-person, in a public place such as a restaurant. On the phone, she sounds nervous, and gives only her name and her assurance that she is “very serious, and very concerned, and willing to pay.” She will not elaborate on her problem until the PCs meet her face to face.

Karen *looks* like she’s normally cheerful, but her face is tired-looking, now, with sunken eyes under large sunglasses, and a weary frown. Her husband died nine days ago, and the police have effectively closed the case as a suicide. Karen disagrees, and tells her story:

*Ron wasn’t suicidal. We were both very happy and things were going fine. I know that something was done to him to make him do what he did . . .*

*I was with him, at home, the night he died. We had just got back from a day in the city, doing some shopping and visiting his parents. We had stayed out a little late drinking in Georgetown and we were both a little buzzed, but neither of us were drunk, since his mother had been with us . . .*

*When we got home, we were unwinding, relaxing together on the couch, when he went crazy. He started shaking, and then looked at me with the eyes of . . . the eyes of a different man. He started laughing and screaming things. Pointless, ridiculous things about glory and – I’m **really** not making this up – how he was going to get rid of the Senate!*

*I tried to calm him down, give him something more to drink, get his mind off whatever had gotten into him, but he wouldn’t have it. He grabbed me and smiled and said that now he finally had the power he deserved . . . and then he just ran out to the balcony and jumped off, laughing.*

*It wasn’t him. I don’t know about things like this. I don’t **believe** in things like this. But something killed my husband. He wasn’t himself, and he wasn’t crazy.*





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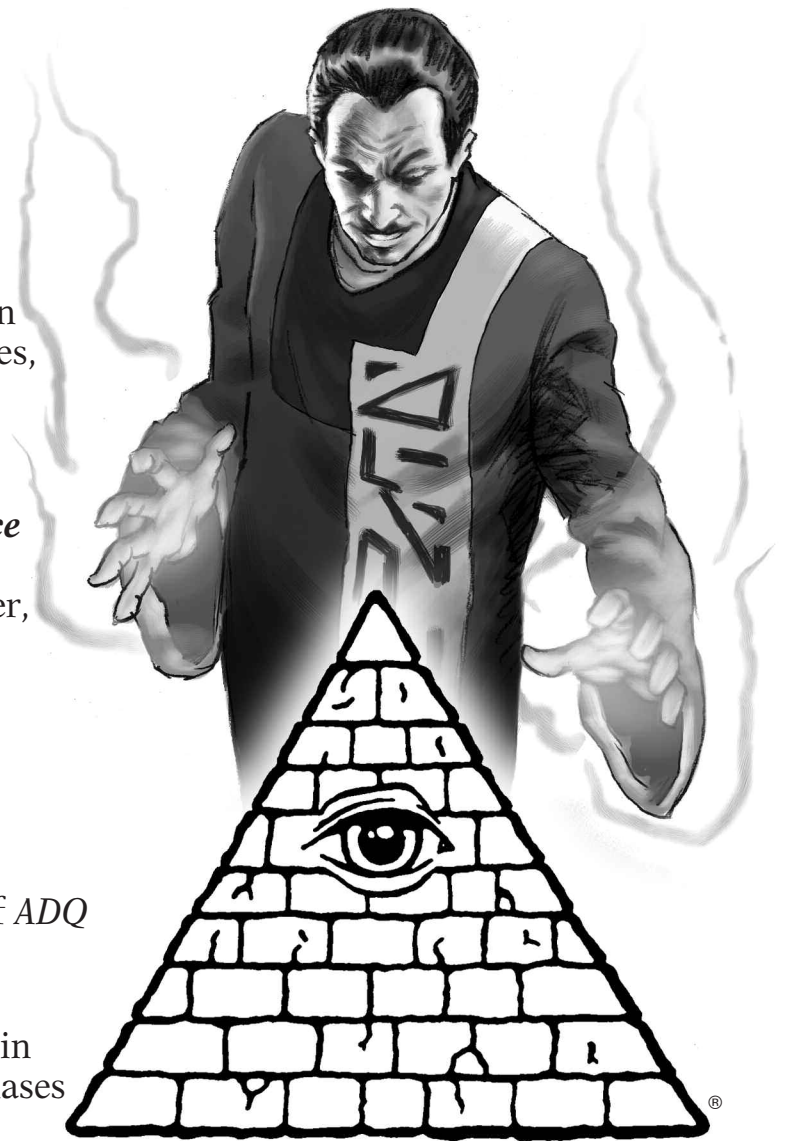
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