Friend Or Foe

It has been my experience, when introducing new characters into games, that the original group will treat the newcomer like they have a DEFCON 1 level of cooties. It is quite amusing to see the newcomer attempt to breach the circle of trust in a group once introduced. It could be that we are trying to roleplay something interesting and a normal introduction is just not that exciting or maybe we feel that this new character needs to prove themselves worthy before they are fully accepted. In some cases, I think it is warranted however, most of the time we are just trying to get a new character up and running and get back to the story at hand. The conversations that characters have with one another can go in circles and sometimes even create tension between one or more characters which can create an interesting dynamic in the storyline or a block in forward inertia.

For example, let's say we have a group of four investigators who just lost a good friend when they uncovered a Deep One colony beneath the old warehouse they were investigating on the docks. They were all pretty banged up and have been discharged from the hospital. They convene at the hotel cafe in the morning to regroup and make a plan going forward. They decide to head to the local library and try to find anything they can about the caverns they discovered under that warehouse. In doing so a professor of geology introduces himself and says that he couldn’t help but overhear them talking about the caverns and being a geologist he offers to provide information about the local subterranean landscape. The remaining three investigators begin a delicate game of cat and mouse with the professor, which would have you think that he introduced himself as Obed Marsh. The conversation turns ugly and the professor is turned away. So now we are going to have to find another way to introduce our helpful professor into the group, the suspicion has already been established and so the next encounter is going to seem like the man is tailing the investigators. It seems we have role played ourselves into a corner here. It is going to take some fairly unorthodox work to get this professor into the inner circle.

It could just be human nature to be guarded and suspicious when a new person comes into our lives, but think about it, is that really the case. If you were researching a cave you found, which didn't have monsters in it, and a helpful professor offered his expertise and knowledge to you would you not happily take him up on the offer. After a bit of conversation would he not become a resource for you, you might even get his phone number and ask if you could bend his ear again sometime. Now you have an awesome geology professor that you can bring up at parties when validating some bullshit you're are telling your friends, "well I have a geologist friend who says". If you did have a cave with monsters in it, would you not want an experts opinion about the caves and mineral make up of the area? At the very least do we not realize we are playing a game and that poor Trevor whose character just died wants to get back into the game, not have to act like a deep-cover operative trying to infiltrate the most secretive criminal organization on the planet. Come on folks, I just want to tell you about rocks and get eaten by something eventually.

It makes some sense that investigators in a Call of Cthulhu game would be guarded and not want just anyone to wander in and be privy to the secrets of eldritch horror that the rest of the group holds. To have a basic conversation though, I think we are safe there. You have to think in terms of what others may think of you as an investigator. First off our professor would not in his wildest dreams think that the group encountered ocean-dwelling, Dagon worshiping, Cthulhu calling monsters in a cave by the docks. So to him you are all talking about caves and guess what, Ummm geologist here, I know about that shit. Of course, being a geology professor how often does he get a chance to talk about his passion with people who aren't his students or other colleagues at work. As long as you keep the monster part out of the story there should be no problem right, you can drop a few fishmen hints once he gets deeper in and see if he calls you back next time.

I have had groups who, even when all the characters have been in the core group for some time, still manage to withhold information from each other and keep a tight lip when they know something that could be useful to the group. I am not sure what we think we are accomplishing by not spilling our guts about the horrors we know to be true. I mean initially, you don't want to tell people you just met that, you have taken multiple jaunts on winged beasts through endless space to Celeno, but if your buddies were riding right alongside you like an episode of cosmic horror CHIPS, why not let them know. You can assess the variable trustworthiness of a person and let out what you think is appropriate for the level of depth that character has been immersed into thus far. Even better just dump it in their lap and see how well they handle it. If you are trying to protect the person from the horrors you have seen, well there are more right around the corner, it's better to get it all out in the open, no need to be protective. The person you refuse to confide in today could be food for a blasphemous beast tomorrow, so there’s no need to protect their delicate sensibilities.

When it comes to mythos tomes and forbidden knowledge I find that there is another point of secrecy that is not entirely necessary. Again there are always times when playing your cards close to the vest is the best option but when your fellow investigators are staring down the same mind-bending horrors as you are, why keep your knowledge a secret. It could be that there is an angle that you had not thought of or an application for a spell, which you have failed to recognize. Besides telling your friends that you can summon a Hunting Horror gets you serious props in a party situation. Yet we keep these things to ourselves, why, is it because we don't want our companions to know just how crazy we have become? Or is there something inherent in a game such as Call of Cthulhu that makes us want to be secretive and hide in the shadows. Maybe it is that we want our characters to be mysterious to those around them. That is fine to an extent but when you have a room full of secretive mystery men and women you end up with a bunch of sideways defensive and guarded conversations that go in circles and get everyone nowhere.

“Good evening Mr. Brown, we are happy to have you as a dinner guest.”

“Happy to be here Mr. Stewart, the food is wonderful.”

“I was wondering if you had any interesting things come up in your research lately, my colleagues and I have been researching local legends and we thought that an anthropologist such as yourself would have all sorts of interesting facts about the area.”

“Nothing of any interest, what in particular are you studying?”

“Oh, nothing specific just the history of the area.”

"Well, my area of expertise is in South American regions, not the immediate area."

"Well, I was wondering if you had heard any of the local legends."

“No, which legends are you speaking of.”

"Just in general, we have been reading histories of the surrounding countryside and found some interesting tales."

“Oh, tales of what exactly.”

“Nothing too interesting, we were wondering if you had any tales from the area that you thought were particularly intriguing.”

“Nothing of note, just bla bla bla.”

See, This kind of thing can go on forever without any conclusion. Would it not be more interesting if Mr. Brown simply answered with a few tales that he though odd from the area. This might open up Mr. Stewart and make him feel more comfortable divulging what he has been looking into, thus having booth men converge on the topic that we are trying to get to in the first place. Hey, you have some info that will help me out and I’ve dug up some facts that validate theories you may have had regarding your current knowledge of the situation. Fantastic, let's work together to figure this out and then die horribly in an old dank cavern somewhere. Isn't that what we all want anyhow, just give them what they want, for better or worse it will make the game interesting.

I think too many times we feel that we need to win the game, and we hold back information as if we need to pull our trump cards out later and win the day. Well, this is not that type of game. The fun is in the journey, not the victory, so why not just spill the beans and let the story take you away. The adventure is there, we just need to get it kick-started and ride it to our doom. We learn from playing so many other games, be it role-playing games, card games or board games that we need to be the sole survivor or the victor at the end. Keeping secrets is a big part of many games and so we play as such. We want to be the one who has the secret knowledge that tips the scales. Well, in Call of Cthulhu the scales are immeasurably tipped against you to start with so what’s the point. There is no winning, there is only having the best and most interesting death scene.

So I say to all of us who play, let it out, scream it from the mountains, play your hand, introduce yourself. Get to the heart of the matter as fast as you can and let your team know where you stand. It couldn’t hurt, and it might just save the day. You didn't expect to defeat the forces of the Mythos, did you? Don't worry the other players won't think any less of you if you don't have a fabulous reveal that answers all the right questions just in the nick of time. Chances are you will either take that information to your grave or be too little too late. Just spill your guts; it will feel good trust me.