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Mythos Rising

A Post-Apocalyptic Setting for Cthulhu Risus

(and a supplement for Risus: the Anything RPG, by S. John Ross)

The main Risus site is here: www222.pair.com/sjohn/risus.htm

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Recent History:

Early in the 21st century the effects of peak oil hit the world's industrialized societies, with the price of oil, gas and eventually all commodities skyrocketing. The economy grinds to a standstill. Companies lay off workers but the stock market continues to plummet. Economic collapse is in full swing.

In the U. S., the government tries to blame the crisis on everything from OPEC, the Arab nations, and internal dissenters or terrorists working to disrupt the nation's oil supply. These explanations are accepted by some segments of the population and parroted by the news media, but many are aware of the reality: peak oil has hit, and the age of cheap oil is over.

Supermarkets start rationing food, with those able to afford it buying special cards enabling them to be first in line. Food riots erupt in the streets, and several famous supermarket chains are left in ruins, their special cards torn to pieces or burned to a crisp. Martial law is declared and the Constitution suspended. Finally, the army commandeers the remaining gas and oil, so only the military and the most essential industries (mainly farming) have access to them. Military rule is the order of the day as soldiers protect shipments of food, which is shipped as a priority to wealthy urban centers.

Churches and other community groups try to provide a progressive response to the crisis by developing independent and sustainable communities that grow their own food and use windmills, solar power, and other renewables on a local level. Part of their idea is that by proving useful to and serving neighboring areas the goodwill and cooperation they'll generate among such communities will help keep them all safe.

As gas and oil get more rare still, the military is progressively less able to keep order; biker gangs and similar groups of thugs raid and pillage independent and urbanite communities alike.

Some large gangs are able to take over small towns and rule the population through terror, their leaders becoming appropriately known as warlords. Some independents try to organize and fight back, but they face an additional obstacle: they are seen as a threat by the heavily militarized federal government, so any and all independent, armed groups are lumped together with gangs and declared domestic terrorists. Communities are required to declare loyalty to the government and turn in all weapons to be eligible for food shipments.

Fighting between the military and several independent communities breaks out, but is largely a draw as the military is progressively less able to command its own troops. Oil and gas are now so expensive and so rare that (other than the military, which tries to control it all) only the very wealthy are able to afford them. The food shortage in the U. S. becomes so severe that some people resort to cannibalism. Some gangs of cannibals form, hunting lone or defenseless people down and eating them.

As if all this weren't enough, then *They* appear. Sporadic accounts of attacks from horrific creatures that look like walking tentacles shock and terrify people. These accounts are followed by tales of other monstrous creatures, among them dog-like things with tentacles sprouting from their necks that run people down and eat them, and humanoid beings that seem to come from nowhere who grab people and then disappear. Speculation is ripe about where the creatures come from. Some believe them to come from a secret government experiment gone wrong (or even worse, gone *right*), while others suspect biowarfare from another country, an alien invasion force, magically conjured monsters from another dimension, demons from the book of Revelation, or just mass hallucinations.

As these stories become more and more commonplace, an epidemic of flu-like fever begins to spread across the country. The fever is severe, with about one sixth of those who contract it falling into a coma. Panic spreads.

A surge of hope seems to be realized when people begin awakening from their comas, but joy quickly turns to horror as the frenzied fever victims - their brains damaged or somehow *changed* - do their best to attack, kill, and eat everyone in sight. Those who survive such attacks often become infected themselves (the illness is about 66 percent contagious). Panic spreads faster than "zombie fever" does. Fear of the disease is so great that some churches and hospitals who minister to the sick are burned to the ground.

Zombie fever is the final straw, and the military (and thus, the federal government) loses control completely. Many army units simply give up and disband, while others become rogues (thieves, robbers), or serve local warlords, or try to become warlords themselves. A few decide to dedicate themselves to something higher, to serve and protect the remaining innocent and helpless. They are dubbed "Samurai" by some, and the name sticks.

Tales of more horrors roaming the countryside continue to spread, as are stories of people fighting back with everything from spells prepared from aged tomes to high-tech weaponry to psychic powers. For some unknown reason - perhaps connected to the presence of the monsters - some people are awakening to the fact that they have powerful psychic abilities. In addition to typical telepathic abilities, these sensitives are able to feel the proximity of creatures from beyond and sometimes dispel or drive them away.

Those psychics who aren't driven insane by mental contact with monsters are sometimes very much valued by the communities who are aware of their potential - both for protection against strange creatures and sometimes against their fellow humans (and occasionally, psychics will work for - or are made to work for - rogues, gangs, or warlords). The more superstitious communities, on the other hand, wonder why psychics have their abilities, and suspect them of being evil and in league with the monsters.

A few intrepid souls known as *stalkers* (who will often work with psychics, if they're not psychic themselves) band together and start going on the road, seeking out sources of evil and fighting them.

Overall, the world population now largely consists of isolated enclaves of humans trying to survive on their own. The average person doesn't know how much outside infrastructure or organization still functions outside their local area. Isolated communities try to keep in touch via radio, including short wave, and also other means like messages in bottles thrown in the sea.

Some Possible Sources of the Mythos Invasion:

- Government experiments (at locations like Area 51) in search of a new source of energy opened a gateway to another universe. Can the creatures that came through be dispelled or defeated with traditional spells from Mythos texts? Special high-tech weapons? Or something as ordinary as salt or garlic? The only way to find out is to try...

- A group of rebels, who in their desperate fight against an increasingly tyrannical government looked to the spells they found in an ancient tome as a possible weapon...

- A secret government group has been investigating occult activities for years, especially those involving ancient texts. Pressed by a desperate government to find some new weapon to regain control of the country, the group decides to perform a ritual of summoning they found in the Book of True Magick...

- the stars are right. Enough said.

- they are demons from chapter 9 of the book of Revelation.

Some possible campaign themes:

- try to survive in a city: forge a new independent community, live as thieves or rogues, join a samurai unit
- try to survive in the country: forge a new independent community, live as thieves or rogues, join a samurai unit
- find the source(s) of the mythos invasions in the local area, and stop them
- go on the road, finding source(s) of mythos invasions, and destroying/stopping them
- resist the remnants of the military government bent on reinstituting a dictatorship
- the local area has become unsafe: monsters, zombies, gangs, etc. Go on the road to find or establish a new haven.

New Clichés

Stalker (knowledge of Mythos creatures and texts, dedication to defeating and dispelling the Mythos invasion, tracking, shooting)

Psychic (psychically feel the proximity of Mythos creatures, "hold" or temporarily paralyze people or Mythos creatures, read minds, dispel Mythos entities). *This must be a double-pump cliché.*

GM note: for a character to feel the proximity of or to hold a creature, have their player make a check of Psychic cliché vs. one half of the monster's cliché. To dispel, use the monster's full cliché. To read minds or hold a human, use the psychic cliché vs. whatever cliché of the target's is most appropriate, or an impaired die if none are.

Independent, Survivalist (wilderness survival, shooting) - the survivalist, usually with a small band of family or friends, holes up in some strategic, well-stocked location and tries to keep everyone else away by force of arms

Independent, Progressive (personable, good social skills, farming) - this type believes no one can be safe alone, and tries to build a sustainable community that is a repository of useful things like food, medicine, tools, books, etc. and people who have important skills or knowledge (including medicine, farming, self-defense, etc.).

Loyalist (shooting, fighting, following orders) - a member of a military unit that still tries to serve the federal government, or what they think their last orders were.

Rogue (shooting, fighting, stealing, intimidation) - a member of a military unit that has decided to survive by becoming a bandit and robbing others, preferably ones too helpless to fight back.

Samurai (shooting, fighting, being noble, protecting the weak) - a member of a military unit that has decided to live with their primary purpose being serving and protecting the remaining innocents who still live.

Survivor (shooting, fighting, survival) - a member of a military unit that has just decided to survive and abandon any pretense of military discipline or higher purpose. They generally don't rob others, and if they do take something they will usually try to offer some service in exchange.

Warlord (fighting, giving orders, intimidation) - a leader of a large gang-controlled area.

Zombie (eat people, spread disease by biting or other blood-to-blood contact) - someone who contracted Zombie fever, fell into a coma, and woke up, usually in a bloodthirsty rage. The fever affects different people differently, some act like the mindless zombies from a George Romero movie, while others can be more actively savage: think of a cross between the "infected" from *28 Days Later* and the "reavers" from the show *Firefly*. Regardless, zombies are not undead and can be killed normally.

Example of Play

Here's the introduction for a scenario I ran at a Monday game night for the Seattle's Gamer's Assemble group:

Leaving Las Vegas

You wake up with a start. You look around you, but nothing seems amiss - no more so than usual, anyway. The lot of you are still holed up in one of the conference rooms of the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas. Everyone else is asleep, some on hammocks, one or two on a couch, most on the floor. The makeshift barricades against the doors still seem secure.

You wonder what it is that woke you. Not that you need much of a reason to stay awake nights during these times. It's only been a couple of weeks since everything really went to hell, but it seems like a lifetime ago. Yes, oil and gas prices went through the roof, the economy fell into shambles, and the government suspended the Constitution and descended into outright dictatorship, but all that was downright comforting compared to what happened next.

A very virulent kind of influenza had spread through the country like wildfire, many of the victims falling into comas. As if that weren't bad enough, people described seeing - and sometimes being attacked by - horrific creatures the very sight of which threatened to drive them insane. The scuttlebutt around Vegas was that something finally got out of Area 51. The final straw was when the coma victims started to recover - and then proceeded to try to kill and eat everyone in sight.

With these "zombies" running loose and the military overwhelmed, people had to take the matter of survival into their own hands. You, a number of other Las Vegas locals, and a few wealthy (correction: formerly wealthy) tourists had broken into the sealed but abandoned hotel to get some resources of food and water and to find some kind of a safe haven. Your group wound up in this particular room, while other groups are holed up elsewhere in the hotel. This seemed like a good idea at first, but it's been getting increasingly difficult to scavenge food. To add to the problem, you're beginning to suspect that one of your companions is starting to come down with zombie fever, which means you've probably all been exposed. That means the majority of you are going to come down with it, which means some of you - you're not sure how many - will become zombies.

A low noise startles you out of your reverie. It sounds something like a burst of static. Then you realize what it is: someone left the short wave (the radio had been scavenged from somewhere) on, and it was picking up a broadcast! Excited, you rush over to the headphones to listen in.

Unfortunately, the message is not getting through very well, and is punctuated and occasionally obscured by bursts of static: "...repeat, we have a cure for zombie fever. If it is taken in **static** we estimate the cure rate to be as high as ninety percent. We will distribute the medicine to all who come and ask **static**... This message **static** repeat. This is Free Radio Seattle. Our community is free of zombies. We have a cure for zombie fever, repeat... **static**", and the message fades out.

You groan inwardly. Why did it have to be Seattle, so far away? Heck, with everything from zombies to gangs to monstrous creatures running around, just getting out of Vegas is very possibly more than any of you can manage, even working together. But if you've already been exposed to zombie fever, and with food running out, what choice do you have?

You look around at your sleeping companions, and decide against waking them up.

Come the morning, you figure they'll need their rest.

And here's how the game went:

I hadn't GMed for about a year, so I was a little overwhelmed when *seven* players showed up! It was a blessing though, as everyone was fun to be around and seemed to really get into the game very quickly. Luckily the rules-light nature of the game helped me keep everything straight, something I couldn't have done with a more crunchy set of rules.

The game started with everyone holed up in a suite of the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas, having just heard over the short wave that a cure for zombie fever (which everyone had been exposed to) had been found in Seattle. As the characters are introduced to each other and they begin discussing what to do, they hear a banging on the door with someone demanding to be let in. In comes the Psychic Hitman (Cat's character), shouting that the zombies are coming. The PCs retreat to an adjoining room when zombies begin pounding on the door and start to break in. Frantically discussing among themselves how best to get out of the hotel, one proposal someone comes up with is to make for the inclinator (the Luxor's version of an elevator) shaft and climb down, and the other idea is to break a window and repel down the side of the building. At this point I'm quite sure the players will decide on a strategy to get out as a unified group, understanding the cardinal rule that all gamers are sure to know: if you find yourself in a horror movie, don't split up!

The group promptly splits up, with some of the PCs (I can't remember all the character names so I'm making up titles: the Psychic Doctor, Construction Guy, the Papparazzo, and Dale Braveheart) making for the inclinator while the others break a window and try to slide down to the next floor using a rope of tied-together bedsheets. Zombies come after both groups - the inclinator group manages to close the doors to the shaft before the zombies get to them, but unfortunately when they made their break for the inclinator they forgot to close the door to the room behind them. Zombies promptly enter and go after the remaining PCs (Psychic Hitman, Joe Bob the Survivalist Gun Nut, and Roger the Stunt Driving Outdoorsman Mechanic). Joe Bob is the last one left in the room and empties his shotgun at the approaching zombies, then slides down the bedsheet rope just before they get to him. While the window group repeats the procedure every couple of floors, the inclinator group eventually reaches the first floor, where the inclinator has stopped. They'd like to reach the garage and get to a car, but the nearest stairs down are across the hall. In between them and the stairs are rows of slot machines, with about half a dozen zombies mindlessly playing the slots. The group tries to sneak quietly by, but are interrupted when a wounded man staggers towards them, pleading for help, with two zombies in close pursuit.

The majority want to leave him to his fate, but Construction Guy (Jayson's character) steps forward and catches the wounded fellow just before he collapses (in doing so, he very probably saves the entire session from ending in a TPK - more on that soon!). The Doctor tries to fight one of the zombies, but takes two blows and passes out. Construction Guy valiantly picks him up too, and drags them both towards the stairs while Dale Braveheart, the Jujitsu race car driver, fights the zombies off with a mop handle.

Meanwhile, the window group reaches the ground and makes for a taxicab that looks relatively intact. Inside is a zombie taxi driver, who opens the back door of the car for them. This weirds everyone out so Psychic hitman blows the zombie cab driver away, and they proceed to hotwire the car.

As they're about to take off a huge Hound appears out of nowhere, sprouts tentacles, and licks its chops. Joe Bob fails his sanity check and runs screaming back towards the zombies. Psychic Hitman uses his psi to mentally hold the monster in place while Joe Bob recovers, then they hightail it out of there in the taxicab.

The other group makes it down the stairs, get their cars, and unblock the entrance to make their escape before the zombies get to them. They try to escape Las Vegas via I-15, but are frustrated by the abandoned vehicles and zombies blocking the way.

Meanwhile the window group is raiding a zombified police station for weapons and ammo when the Hound appears again and attacks. It grabs Psychic Hitman with tentacles and starts taking bites out of him, in spite of Joe Bob's attack with a water bottle and repeated shot gun blasts. With a last desperate attempt Psychic Hitman is able to mentally freeze the creature, and the group escapes the area in a K-9 police van apprehended by Roger. The Hound chases them down the highway as Joe Bob fires off blast after shotgun blast at it. Eventually the wounded Hound falls behind, and they meet the other group in their cars further North on the highway.

In the other group the Doctor has recovered and tended the man they rescued from the zombies. It turns out he's a sorcerer with a copy of the book *Monstres and their Kynde*, which describes Hounds of Tindalos and how to dispel them. It turns out the Hounds (there appear to be several of them in the area, according to the sorcerer) are trying to keep everyone in Las Vegas there so they can eat them one by one at their leisure, and so won't let anyone leave. The sorcerer tells them about a spell he can cast to dispel the Hounds, but it requires blood from everyone, and a method to get the enspelled blood on or into the Hounds. After everyone sacrifices enough blood (for some reason, Jayson's character sacrificed more blood than anyone else... of course, Jayson did have to leave for the night shortly before this part of the session...), the sorcerer is able to enchant the blood with a Dispel Hound of Tindalos spell. The blood is inserted into hollowpoint rounds which are distributed to several of the PCs with guns. The PCs fire up their vehicles and make a break for the desert.

At the outskirts of town the vehicles are attacked by no less than 5 of the Hounds. Joe Bob, in the car driven by Dale Braveheart, shoots one of the Hounds, which promptly fades from this universe in a most grotesque and frightening manner. So frightening that both Dale and Joe Bob fail their sanity checks. Dale floors the accelerator as Joe Bob fights him for the wheel.

Meanwhile Psychic Doctor is able to freeze one of the Hounds, but another Hound breaks into the car through the rear window and starts eating the sorcerer. Papparazzo empties a gun into it but it's unfazed. The sorcerer passes out. Another Hound crashes through the front window of Dale's car and starts eating him. He desperately tries to shake the Hound off him with fancy driving, but keeps getting bitten again and again.

Psychic Hitman is able to take out the sorcerer-eating Hound with one of the blood bullets. Psychic Doctor's hold on one Hound is beginning to break, while Dale, in a last desperate attempt to save his life (one more bite and he's unconscious), pulls off a great driving maneuver and the Hound trying to eat him flies off the car.

The PCs get a couple of more lucky breaks and are able to take out the remaining Hounds in short order, using their enchanted blood bullets.

So the evening ends with the PCs being successful - they've left Las Vegas, and are on the road to Seattle. I thought the group worked together well: the doctor helped patch everyone up and paralyze some of the enemy, and the combat characters played their roles effectively as did the psychics and the mechanic, who worked on the cars. A special congratulatory mention is due to Jayson for saving the sorcerer - without his help (i.e. the blood bullets), the final battle against the Hounds would most likely have resulted in a TPK. Papparazzo also did extremely well even without any combat skills: skill at sneaking around really came in handy! Also thanks to Jayson for bringing cool figures of a zombie horde to the game.

I also thought that overall the rules helped enhance the game: because they were light, they didn't get in the way, and helped keep the action moving fast.

As to the unanswered questions: How many of the PCs will come down with zombie fever? Will they make it to Seattle in time? Is there really a cure? That remains to be seen...

Thanks to everyone who participated for making the game so much fun! If you have any feedback on the game rules - what you found confusing, what was good/helpful - please let me know.

Some links for more info on Peak Oil (a very real concern):

www.dieoff.org

www.survivingpeakoil.com

www.globalpublicmedia.com

www.oilcrisis.com

www.peakoil.net

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