modern dispatch #49

Requires the use of the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game, published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc.

Night Lights

Night Lights is an encounter designed for the Pinebox campaign setting. Alternate leads and hooks for use in other modern-world campaigns are provided for your convenience.

Introduction and Background

This issue provides an unusual encounter, useful whenever the heroes decide to spend the night in the Big Thicket. This encounter could be used with 12 to Midnight's upcoming adventure, *Skinwalker,* or it could take place at another time that the GM deems appropriate. While we set this adventure in the Big Thicket of East Texas, this encounter is appropriate for any heavily wooded region of the world. This is especially true if the forest has a reputation for inexplicable disappearances or reappearances.

The right atmosphere is important if this encounter is to work. Encourage roleplaying. Turn the lights down low and eat some s'mores. (See sidebar *What are S'Mores?* to the left.) Have the characters tell a few ghost stories. If the heroes are stalking the Skinwalker, they probably want to post a watch. They are safe from him tonight, but there are other frightful things in the woods this evening.

While this encounter should not be deadly, it can have a dynamic effect on the campaign. The ramifications of the encounter, alien reconnaissance or top secret government project, could impact a hero's psyche for many game sessions.

What are S'Mores?

You never made s'mores? Well it's high time you learned! These are great camping treats, but they work nicely in the fireplace, too. The name is a contraction of *some more*, as in, "I want some more." How do you do it? Well here is a list of what you need:
- Marshmallows
- Chocolate bars (Bars with nuts are okay.)
- Graham cracker
- Stick or a skewer

Start a roaring campfire. Lay out two squares of graham cracker, and place a square of chocolate on each. Stick a marshmallow on the skewer and toast it over the fire. When the marshmallow is ready (some prefer a nice, golden-brown marshmallow, others do not consider it done unless it catches on fire), place it on top of one of the graham cracker/chocolate stacks. Now make it a sandwich by placing the other graham cracker/chocolate stack upside-down on top of the marshmallow. The idea is that the hot marshmallow will melt the pieces of chocolate and make a gooey, sweet, yummy mess sandwiched between two pieces of graham cracker. Start eating.

12 to Midnight is not responsible for anyone's becoming addicted to this recipe. Also, do not stand too close to the fire. After millions of dollars in studies, the Surgeon General has determined that fire is very hot and can cause burns.

Alternate Hooks

What do you mean you're not playing *Skinwalker*? What do you mean you've never even *heard* of Skinwalker? Oh, the humanity! You can check out the sidebar on page 4 for the details, but in the meantime we promised some alternate hooks and we intend to deliver.
- The heroes could be camping just for the joy of being in the outdoors.
- The characters are members of a search party.
- The team could be searching for someone: a lost child or a violent criminal fleeing justice.
- One of the team members finds a treasure map and the heroes are en route to becoming millionaires.

If you have some other ideas, come visit us at our site, www.12tomidnight.com. Tell us how you fared and what happened to your heroes. We want to know.

Camping

Whatever the reason, your team is camping out. This encounter is written with the assumption that the heroes are in pursuit of the Skinwalker (see sidebar *What is Skinwalker?* on page 4) or some other nefarious opponent; therefore, the team is alert and anticipates some surprises—let us not disappoint them.

Nothing happens until after the heroes decide to go to sleep. Make note of whether the team establishes a night watch. When you feel the time is right, read or summarize the following:

The wind blows through the woods. You can hear pine needles slapping against adjacent limbs. An owl hoots in the night. Moments later, an armadillo screams as it flees an undetermined threat.

Provide the heroes with similar sounds as the night goes on. Keep the players on edge. Have their characters make *Spot* and *Listen* checks that are never successful. You should roll the dice secretly on occasion and shake your head. Give no hint as to why you rolled.

Attack

At 2:30 in the morning, the action ensues. Heroes on watch can make a *Listen* check (DC 20). Success means they detect a scurrying in the underbrush close to camp. They cannot see much in the dark; the moonlight does not pierce the evergreen canopy. What

they hear is the sound of night creatures running from a threat. This threat does not seek the wee creatures of the night, however—it seeks man. This creature sees the infrared outlines of those on watch, and of others rolled up in sleeping bags.

The heroes are under attack. Two foes are present for each member of the team who is awake. The attackers get a +6 to hit and, unless they passed their *Listen* checks, the heroes are flat-footed. Even night-vision devices do not help. The opponents' equipment emits energy that scrambles mundane night-vision gear and causes an effect similar to snow blindness to anyone so equipped.

LISTENING CHECK CIRCUMSTANCE MODIFIERS

Circumstance	DC
Night watch paralyzed with first shot	15
Hero calls out to his teammates	0
Hero thrashes about from the stun net	-10
Modifier: Characters who are sleeping receive a −5 penalty to the roll.	

Remember: 1 always fails and 20 always succeeds.

Read or summarize the following after the surprise round to the people who are hit:

Something crashes through the woods, but the noise stops as quickly as it starts. The dark veil of night cloaks whatever is out there. Suddenly, you feel a sting in your chest. Is it a barb? Whatever it is, you feel sluggish. Your arms and head become anchors that drag you down to the ground. Rest can cure this ... just a little rest, just for a moment.

Heroes who are hit suffer one hit point of nonlethal damage and must make an immediate Fortitude save (DC 20). Failure results in unconsciousness for the next 30 minutes.

A character who saves suffers a −2 penalty to all physical ability scores and a −4 penalty to all mental ability scores due to drowsiness and loss of muscular control. These effects last for 30 minutes. Heroes who save see their comrades collapse. If you are using 12 to Midnight's *Fear Effects* rules, treat this as a minor spook.

After firing their first volley, the attackers advance and try to use their stun nets on anyone standing. Roll initiative for conscious characters. Wounded heroes suffering from the effects of the aliens' dart attack receive a −1 penalty to initiative because of their temporary dexterity decrease. The attackers have a +6 on their initiative roll and throw their stun nets with a +6 to hit. For each round that a hero struggles against the net, he is jolted by an electrical shock for 1d8 hp of temporary damage and must make a Fortitude save (DC 15). Failure means the character is stunned for 30 seconds. After that time passes, the character can resist again, but the net's effects remain the same. Characters who struggle without being stunned remove the next on a successful Reflex save (DC 15 + damage suffered that round). Each hunter carries one stun net. It is impossible to speak while resisting the effects of the stun net, as the jaw clinches from the electrical current flowing through the body.

If any of the team avoids the nets and fights back, each hunter carries a pair of metal poles with cattle prod–like tips. These shock sticks act as metal batons or, if thrust with intent to prod, do 1d6 points of regular bash damage plus 1d8 points of electrical damage. The electrical damage is temporary.

A hero may flee the area. If the hunters have prisoners, they do not pursue fleeing characters, although they do monitor them. Their equipment can track anyone in the area. Should the team defeat the hunters, they flee and do not return this night. The attackers retreat if any of them loses half his hit points. They carry away unconscious captives or companions, with the latter having priority.

Capture

Once the skirmish ends, the hunters inject a more powerful dose of the paralysis serum into heroes trapped inside nets or sleeping bags. The captor can adjust the dose according to how resistant he perceives his victim to be. What this amounts to is an opposed check, with the hunter making a *Sense Motive* check at +5 versus the victim's *Bluff* check. Failure for the victim results in paralysis. Success means the victim can attempt to act drugged.

After the fight read the following to captured characters:

You want to move, but cold liquid flows in your veins where the hot blood has fled. The cold presses down on your limbs, and even your eyelids are leaden and unresponsive. Bright light comes in a flood. Is it still night? Or is it noon? You feel your body rise—are you floating? Words are spoken, but in what language? And is the sound formed by tongues? Blackness comes with a roaring wind.

Weightless. You float on air? ... water? ... a void? The light ... turn out the light! Blackness comes again as you vibrate beyond gravity.

The pain! What is in your brain? Pressure. Searing pressure! Your brain is going to explode and the last thing you will see is brains and blood. God it has to stop! And what are the owls doing? Owls stare down upon you as blood drips from your temples. Blackness returns as the owls jump from their perch and fly away.

Escape

Heroes who act drugged present an additional challenge for the GM. Remember that these characters are not at their sharpest. If they struggle before being taken away and the hunters have other captives, they do not think twice about leaving a struggling captive behind. Even while in transit, if other captives are docile the resistant character is left behind.

The characters are deposited into individual ten-foot-square chambers with no visible doors, isolating each character from his teammates. The vehicle operators can monitor the room, and if a hero becomes active in a chamber, knock out gas is released. There is no save, as the gas flows until consciousness can no longer resist. If hunters are in the room, they have immunity to this gas. This immunity can come from a natural ability or equipment designed to protect the user from the gas.

Should a character maintain his docile act when the hunters enter his room, read or summarize the following:

Four dark shapes look as if they step through the walls. Something glitters on their chests. Are those runes? The faces distort. Are they feathered, like an owl? Big eyes and hoots. Hoots. The wings flap over your body, but fingers grasp your arms and legs.

Something emits a whirring noise near your ear. You try to turn your head, but it won't turn. Something holds it firmly. Glancing from the corner of your eyes, you see something spinning. A drill. It moves closer to your head. You scream. Pain pierces your skull and then life drops down and away like rain.

Retreat

A character who flees the campsite but remains within a quarter of a mile might find a few clues about what has happened to his captured friends. Read the following to heroes who remain close enough to see.

You stop for a moment to catch your breath. All you hear is the night. Then, in the distance, you hear a roar unlike anything you have heard before. Is it an engine, or a demon from hell? Then bright lights shine down from the night sky. Is that a flying disk?

If you are using the 12 to Midnight *Fear Effects* rules, seeing the flying saucer is a *medium shock*. The light lingers over the campsite for one minute, and then it is turned off. The engine roars and the sound fades as the flying saucer leaves the area.

About 20 minutes later, the craft returns. It scans the ground for humans, avoiding any it finds. The hunters attempt to lower the captives as close to camp as possible. This is accomplished by a levitation flow conduit. Once the captives touch the ground the flying saucer leaves.

Within the next 10 minutes, all of the captives return to full capacity—all temporary damage wears off. One thing these folks all share is a severe headache. It hurts to sit up and it is almost impossible to stand. This discomfort fades away after an hour.

Oh Yeah. What Happened?

Who have your heroes encountered? That's left entirely up to you, the GM. It could be the government or a multinational corporation, testing out some highly advanced technology. Maybe the Rangers from *Bloodlines* are involved. Perhaps it was aliens. Nah!

The characters received a probe behind the frontal lobe. It is a permanent part of them. It is powered by brainwaves, thus it functions for the life of the hero. But what does it do?

It provides an opportunity for the GM to forward his story. When you need the hero to suffer from a debilitating headache, you have a good justification. When the character needs to be prompted to follow a certain path, this is the instrument of impetus. The hero now has a logical reason for developing FX gifts. The hero perceives that someone or something is always watching his every move.

Allow us to give you an example of what is going to happen in our campaign. Naturally, our group uses the 12 to Midnight *Fear Effects* rules. It makes the roleplaying fun and enriches gameplay. The characters make *Horror* checks and, instead of always rolling randomly on the table, the GM can sometimes use alternative reactions based on the night the "aliens" picked them up.

Alternate Fear Effects

A character fails a minor spook check in a dark space—perhaps it is night.

An image approaches you of a grey alien holding a thin device in his hand. He stops next to you and you hear the whirring of a drill coming toward your head.

In the real world, the character screams. He stands shaking, unable to move, for 1d3 rounds.

A character fails a medium shock in the dark.

You see owls. Where did you see owls before? They flap their wings—but they have fingers. You must not let the fingers touch you. You must not let their fingers touch you! You cannot let those fingers touch you, again.

The character screams and flees in a random direction for 1d6 rounds.

What is Skinwalker?

Skinwalker is an adventure to be published by 12 to Midnight in August 2005. Among other things, this adventure puts a party of modern heroes in the *thick* of the Big Thicket.

Skinwalker provides two new character classes: the Shaman advanced class which could work well for any hero, and the Skinwalker prestige class, ideal for a challenging foe. Want to face some deadly creatures? The Hunt can put the fear of nature into any lost team. Want some new FX items? Try the medicine pouch, one of three new items.

Visit the 12 to Midnight website for more info, and scare your players out of their skins.

A character fails a great fright in the dark.

Owls ... and more owls. What do they want? Why are they back? Their long fingers pick and probe at you. And what do the runes mean? Runes cover their heavy, black chests. And is that an Uzi?

The character rolls up into a fetal ball and does not react to any stimulus for the next 10 minutes. He is apprehensive when birds are nearby. Owls cause fear.

A character suffers a horrific terror.

The owls are back. They have blood on their wings and it drips from their hands. It splatters the runes on their black chests. The blood pours from a dish—a bowl, to be exact. They carry the bowl closer to you. Only then do you recognize it is not a bowl. It is the top of a skull—your skull.

The character has problems—real problems—like wiping the incessant drool from his chin. He needs treatment to return to his old self. If he sees an owl, he shoots it. If he sees a real alien, or a "MIB" (such as those in found in *Bloodlines)*, he flies into a murderous rage.

Get the picture? Use this event as a story device. Have fun and make your characters paranoid.

Thoughts

This is a bit of an experiment. Do you like the flexibility of choosing the big bad guy, or would you prefer that we provide the foes in exacting detail? We want to know. You can let us know by visiting us at www.12tomidnight.com. We are waiting—right behind the owls.

"Howdy" from 12 to Midnight

In case you are not familiar with us, 12 to Midnight is a Texas-based RPG publisher specializing in modern horror. You might not normally think "Texas" and "horror" go together, but we are pretty sure you will change your mind after spending some time in Pinebox.

Pinebox, Texas, that is—a nice little rural community smack-dab in East Texas. There is a university nearby, a pine forest called the Big Thicket, and a mess of beautiful wildflowers every spring. Unfortunately, it is also the epicenter of a whole lot of bad mojo. We're talking dark magic, serial killers, haunted buildings—the whole ball of wax.

If you want to learn more about Pinebox, just visit our Web site at 12tomidnight.com. You can start using the free campaign setting on our site right now, then watch it continue to grow right here in the pages of *Modern Dispatch*. Of course, Pinebox is *our* setting, but all the material in these pages can just as easily be dropped into *yours*.

If you have any ideas for future issues, or if you want to comment on what you read here, please drop by the forums on our website.

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