

Coyotes in Dark Alleyways

To play this game, you will need:

- Two six-sided dice.
- 24 poker chips, coins, weird-shaped dice, or whatever else, to use as tokens.
- 3-5 people.

Five is the default: one person plays Alex, and everyone else gets a Mystery Sheet. For four people, three people each take a Sheet, and they share the last one between them. For three people, two people each double up on Sheets. If someone's read all the Mystery Sheets (or worse, played before), they should play Alex; they will cause the least damage that way.

If this makes no sense, don't worry about it. It'll make more sense after you read the rules.

Playing Alex:

One of you will play Dr. Alex Stokes, a recently minted Ph.D. in Wildlife Ecology and a massive badass. You work as a research assistant for Dr. Stanley Gehrt, the world's leading expert on urban coyotes. The other research assistant is a grad student named Thomas Meyer, with whom you're on good terms. (You'll meet them later.) According to your research, there are over 2,000 coyotes in the Chicagoland area. You use video cameras, radio collars, and good old-fashioned leg work to study how they live in such an unusual environment.

Fleshing out Alex's personality and history is the first thing you will do as a group. There's a character questionnaire at the end of this document. If you already know who is playing Alex, go ahead and let that player take the lead here. If you don't know yet, just go with whatever sounds cool to people, and then decide after.

Creating Alex's character is important, because it's your first chance as a group to decide what sort of game you're playing. If Alex was raised by a secret society and has powerful fire magicks, that will lead to a very different game than one where Alex went to prep school and is especially good at data collection. I suggest aiming for something like Indiana Jones; you wouldn't quite call him "realistic", but at least he doesn't break the laws of physics. But feel free to play with it, just so long as everyone is on board.

Before you go on, make sure that you know who is playing Alex. If that's you, your job is to show how awesome Alex is, to react to all the weirdness the other players will be throwing at you, and to try to figure out what the heck is going on. Don't worry about doing the sensible thing. You're in a thriller movie, and you're a badass! (Even if you're a prep-school, data-collecting badass, you're still a badass.)

Mechanically, you have a lot of power as Alex. You can pretty much just do what you want, and the other players will have to spend tokens and roll dice to interfere with you at all. You have to stick to narrating just what Alex does, but feel to make her incredibly competent and clever. You'll need it.

(Note: I'll use female pronouns to talk about Alex through the rest of the text, but of course you can pick whatever gender you want for your Alex.)

Playing the Mystery:

The rest of you, you get to be the weird, creepy world that Alex has to deal with. Each of you should take one of the mystery sheets for your special rules. Don't show anyone else your page, and don't tell them what's on it, either. You can talk to each other, of course, but don't spoil the surprises.

As a Mystery player, your goal is to make Alex's player go “holy shit, seriously?” as often as possible. If you don't mess with her, Alex's player won't have any way to show how badass she is. Try to scare her, frustrate her, and most of all, creep her out. Also, try to always have a working theory about what is going on behind the scenes. Your theory won't line up with what the other Mystery players are thinking, which means you have to be flexible, but it gives you a direction to take things.

Most of the time, you can just say what you think should happen. Your Mystery sheet will give you some things to work with, but you are not in the least restricted to those things. As a group, the Mystery players have power over everything in the world that isn't Alex herself.

Alex is special. As the hero of the story, she will run roughshod over all of your plans and creations. Because of Alex's badassery, there's a special rule about her:

Whenever you directly mess with Alex's plans, roll the dice.

There are two ways this could be misunderstood: First, don't take this to mean you have to roll whenever anything creepy happens. You should feel free to make monsters appear at whim, and it is always possible to do your key scenes without spending anything.

But also, you don't get to say that Alex can't do things “because of the way the world is”. If she wants to snap someone out of a trance with a firm slap, she can. If you don't like that, roll dice.

Alex is going to survive, and she'll continue to be a problem for you. But the dice will let you make her life *very* complicated in the mean time. Here's how they work:

When you spend a Mystery token, roll two six-sided dice and add them up. If you want, before the roll you (or one of your generous fellow players) can spend extra Mystery tokens to increase your result. Each token is worth an extra +2 to the roll. After you roll, take your result and look at this chart:

1-6 means that Alex was just too much for you. Despite your best, most creepy efforts, she prevailed.

7-9 means that you get to mess with Alex in some ultimately temporary way. The thing she was chasing escapes, she gets separated from her companions, Dr. Gehrt is mad at her, she is supernaturally terrified to the point that she runs for her life, or something like that. This should affect Alex for about a scene.

10 or 11 means that you get to do something that will more seriously interfere with Alex's life or her plans. She gets captured and taken somewhere far away, she loses important equipment, she gets injured, her best friend isn't speaking to her, her fear of coyotes means she can't get anywhere near them without panicking. This should affect Alex for several scenes at least.

12 or more means that Alex's life is changed irrevocably. She is fired and blacklisted, she loses a hand, or her best friend dies. These moments are rare, and are the scars that Alex will carry with her after the events of this story are over. Alex will adapt and survive, but she will be changed.

When narrating the result of a dice roll, remember that Alex is still a badass, no matter what happens. Most of the time she doesn't really fail, so much as she's overwhelmed by a situation she didn't anticipate. Don't narrate: "You punch the guy, but it doesn't do much. He laughs at you and grabs your wrist." Instead, narrate: "You punch the guy, and he's out like a light. But as he lies there, his eyes open again, showing only white. He says, 'Nice to finally meet you, Dr. Stokes,' as you feel two men you hadn't seen come up behind you and grab your elbows."

In fact, it is against the rules for you to narrate Alex directly failing at one of her exceptional talents on anything less than a roll of 12. (You should feel free to invoke her weakness in your narration, though. That's one place she does fail.)

Just as a suggestion, and not as a rule: if you add some tokens to someone else's roll, consider bringing in something from your Mystery Sheet, and having it affect the outcome.

Alex's player: respect the results of the roll. You're a badass, so you're going to get over your fear or escape your ropes eventually, but don't immediately negate whatever victory the Mystery just won. Look at how long the effects are supposed to last, and try to be faithful to that.

Tokens and dice rolls are a limited resource. As you use them up, you're getting closer and closer to the end of the story. Once you're out, you're out. You can't roll any more dice, so you can't hurt Alex any more. She's escaped, she's won, although perhaps at great cost. Maybe everything has been explained, or maybe not. Either way, take another scene or two to wrap things up, and then you're done.

So much for tokens and dice. Now a few words about the mystery sheets. Your sheet will have the following elements:

A *motif*. This is an image or idea that you should try to incorporate whenever possible. Be creative, and let yourself be drawn in whatever direction you find inspiring. This is just meant to give you a starting point. Try to develop it, and see where it leads you. If what starts out as creepy voices on a tape turns into machete-wielding cultists, that's perfect!

A few *key scenes*. You don't start with any Mystery tokens, which you will need to make Alex's life more difficult. This is how you get them. Each scene gives you a token when you add it to the story (just take it from the central pile, no need to get permission or anything). The first scene is set up pretty explicitly for you, you just have to provide the cool narration. The others will require a little more interpretation.

A *character* or group of *characters*. These are people that Alex will meet during the story. They don't have to be central players, but it's important to give Alex people to interact with.

A *motivation*. This is a little bit more meta than the rest of it. This gives you a goal to shoot for, in relation to the things the other players are narrating. Don't worry about pushing this with every single thing you say, but keep it in the back of your head and do your best to bring it in when you can.

WARNING: I strongly suggest that you don't read any further. Just pass out Mystery Sheets, and only read your own. The game is more fun if you don't know what's coming.

Mystery Sheet 1:

Motif: Mysterious lights, which entice people to follow them. Often called “will-o-the-wisps” or “jack-o-lanterns”, many cultures have reported mysterious lights out in the wilderness, leading travelers astray. Now they seem to have migrated to the wilderness of Chicago.

Key Scene 1: While routinely checking one of the video cameras left at a spot in one of the parks where coyotes are often found, Thomas is baffled by what he sees. Five or six coyotes-- more than you usually see at once-- are seen following an unidentifiable ball of light, which is slowly taking them deeper into the park.

Key Scene 2: While out at night, Alex sees a light in the distance, and is strangely drawn to try to follow it.

Key Scene 3: One morning, Thomas has vanished.

Character: Thomas Meyer, grad student. Thomas is a good-natured and hard-working researcher, who is on pretty good terms with Alex. You should try to play him as helpful and willing to talk to Alex, even about all the weird stuff that is happening. Giving Alex a friend lets her do things like talk about what could possibly be going on, and lets her make slightly more complicated plans. It also gives her a liability, though. Feel free to have Thomas screw up, make bad choices, end up in danger, etc.

Motivation: Malice. Whatever is behind all this weird stuff, it isn't friendly. When it's appropriate, put a sinister twist on whatever gets narrated.

Mystery Sheet 2:

Motif: Strangely aggressive coyotes. Coyotes have prospered and spread largely due to their unique ability to stay out of the way of humans. Unless a coyote is rabid or some other strange circumstance, coyotes will normally run away from humans. This seems to be changing.

Key Scene 1: A coyote is spotted on Michigan Avenue, during the day. He growls at tourists and stops traffic, but doesn't attack anyone. Dr. Gehrt is asked for his opinion by the evening news, and says that perhaps it is rabid. Thomas points out privately that it has none of the behavioral patterns of a real rabid coyote. Chicagoans start to call for anti-coyote measures to be taken.

Key Scene 2: While out tagging coyotes, Dr. Gehrt is bit for the first time in his career. He requires a few stitches.

Key Scene 3: The coyotes attack someone close to Alex, with the intent to kill. (Dr. Gehrt or Thomas are fine targets, or even Alex herself.)

Characters: The Chicago Police Department, and agencies higher up the food chain. The cops seem to be taking an inordinate amount of interest in things around here. They seem to know more than they are saying. Lieutenant Carlo Vincenzi is the main guy they'll run into, until federal agent Linda Matilla shows up.

Motivation: Urgency. Things seem to be quickly progressing and coming to a head. The coyotes are acting weirder and weirder, and the cops are getting more and more interested. If Alex is going to get to the bottom of things, she better do so quickly. Whenever you get the chance, try to make things urgent.

Mystery Sheet 3:

Motif: People with a strange connection to coyotes. There are legends of people who can change their shape, becoming wolves or other animals at will or perhaps at certain times of the month. Perhaps it's an illusion, and something else is actually going on, but it certainly *looks* like the legends are true.

Key Scene 1: While walking at night, Alex sees in the distance what appears to be a small pack of coyotes running alongside two clearly human shapes. It doesn't look like a chase, it looks like they're all out for a nice evening run together. They're out of sight before she gets a good look at them.

Key Scene 2: One of the researchers (perhaps Alex herself) has a backpack or purse or bag stolen. As they pursue the guy, they turn the corner and see only a coyote running down the street. Their bag is there, but something important is missing.

Key Scene 3: Gehrt transforms into a coyote in front of Alex's eyes.

Character: Dr. Stanley Gehrt, world's leading expert on urban coyotes. He's been on this project for decades, and has seen many assistants come and go. He's certainly not a bad guy, but he's not going to take Alex's concerns very seriously, especially if they interfere with her work. Also he appears to be a were-coyote. I wonder what's up with that?

Motivation: Clues, Lies, and Rumors. This has two parts. First: everyone seems to be involved in this somehow. Anyone who's been out at night in Chicago has seen something weird. Second: the number of possible explanations is immense. One guy thinks it's aliens, another thinks it's a government conspiracy, a third person thinks it's demons and vampires. Somebody might even be right.

Mystery Sheet 4:

Motif: Psychic warfare. The danger isn't just out there, it has made its way into Alex's head too. Some of these emotions are definitely not her own. Who put them there, how did they do it, and what is their goal?

Note: By the rules, you are allowed to narrate weird emotions from somewhere else for free. But, by default, Alex will be able to overcome them and keep doing what she was doing. If you want them to affect her actions, you have to spend tokens. This is entirely up to you, you are not required to do so in order to fulfill your key scenes.

Key Scene 1: The researchers leave plasticine models of goose eggs in goose nests, in order to see what teeth marks are left on them. While on a routine trip to go check on the eggs, Alex feels a growing fear as she works her way along the water's edge. By the time she's at the last few nests, she is sorely tempted to skip them entirely.

Key Scene 2: Alex starts to develop a growing disgust for coyotes and anything related to them. She is tempted to quit her job and forget about coyotes.

Key Scene 3: At some point when she's about to do something to uncover or fight the weirdness, Alex feels an almost overwhelming desire to change sides, and join it instead of fighting it.

Characters: Chicago Paranormal Investigations, aka PACT. From their website:

“Chicago Paranormal Investigations (aka PACT) is a group of young paranormal investigators based out of various locations in the Chicagoland. The PACT crew sets out to explore the unknown and to seek answers to the questions asked about the paranormal.”

These guys should be played like the Lone Gunmen from the X-Files. Overly paranoid and credulous, with a lot of weird ideas about what is going on, but with some legitimate knowledge and information as well. Their de facto leader is a college kid by the name of Jez.

Motivation: Interconnection. All of the weird things that are happening? They seem to be tied together somehow. Do your best to create connections between what you narrate and what everyone else is saying. Show that one weird thing is the cause or effect of another, or that seemingly unrelated characters are working together.

Dr. Alex Stokes

What is Alex's gender?

How do friends describe Alex?

Who and what does Alex care about?

What are Alex's exceptional talents?

What's the most badass thing Alex has ever done?

What's one weakness Alex has?

Credits

Written by Peter Borah. Many thanks to Alla Hoffman and Randall Fossi, for a fantastic playtesting session.

This game is part of the Game Chef 2012 competition (<http://gamechef.wordpress.com>).

It uses the following ingredients:

Coyote (Duh.)

Doctor (For the academic setting, and the fact that the main character is a Ph.D.)

Lantern (For Mystery Sheet #1)

Mimic (For Mystery Sheet #3)

Theme: Last Chance. (The game is meant to be played only once, as a lot of the fun comes from being surprised by other people's Mystery Sheets. The motivation "Urgency" is an attempt to bring the theme into the fiction as well.)

Inspiration has been drawn from a variety of sources, but especially:

Dirty Secrets: a game about crime, by Seth Ben-Ezra. While my game has drifted far from its initial inspiration, you can still see the basic structure of "one PC, many GMs" in it. *Dirty Secrets* prompted many productive thoughts about how to make that structure work best.

Apocalypse World by Vincent Baker. The resolution mechanics for my game are little more than a stripped down version of the ones Vincent invented for *AW*. Additionally, thinking about the MC moves and the playbook structure helped a lot with designing the Mystery Sheets.

The *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* series by Fritz Leiber. While my game is set in the modern world, a lot of the story structure is drawn directly from Leiber's stories. He is a master of the "competent heroes in over their heads" genre.