

“What Beebe saw on that trip was a glowing world of creatures so astonishing that for decades many doubted his veracity. Cavalcades of black shrimps, transparent eels, and bizarre fish approached the descending bell, and when Beebe used his spotlight to see them, great shadows and shifting patches of light hovered just out of view, leading him to postulate the existence of giants in the depths. And below the diving bell? There, said Beebe, lay a world that “looked like the black pit-mouth of hell itself.””

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Five years ago your university department secured funding to explore the Marianas Trench, the deepest point in all the oceans. Four days ago the science research vessel Belasco arrived at the surface location of the Trench. Three hours ago you climbed into the diving bell with your colleague. Two hours ago the diving bell passed a depth of 10,000 feet. One minute ago a violent shudder rocked the diving bell.

A few seconds ago you realised that the cable tethering the diving bell to the ship had snapped.

The diving bell now is sinking rapidly into the Trench. You're going to die. Your life is flashing before your eyes. With sickening clarity, you realise why the the cable was severed.

Outside the doomed diving bell, in the inchoate blackness of the Trench, something wonderful and terrible is happening. A fire is burning in the deep.

Descent is a role-playing game for two players. You both play a research scientist trapped within the cramped confines of a diving bell.

Play centres around dramatising the chain of events that leads to the cable being severed, and how that informs the plight of the doomed scientists as they sink into the “*black pit-mouth of hell itself.*”

Grab some blank paper and pencils and go sit close to and opposite each other, and make a mound of regular-sized six-, eight-, and ten-sided dice between you.

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Write down the name of your scientist and some colour such as their field of research on a blank sheet of paper. Then write down six traits that capture the unique character of your scientist. A trait is a pithy description of an important aspect of your scientist. Create traits that will fuel issues that you want to role-play.

Charles creates a scientist called Norman Morris, a Professor in the Zoology faculty of Oxford's Christ Church College. His traits are 'Christian', “Procedure be damned!”, 'Paranoid', 'Jurassic Fauna Specialist', 'Snaps. Under. Pressure', and 'Well Chewed Pen'.

Hand your character sheet to your playing partner. On the character sheet you were handed, write down another three traits. These traits must be concerned - however tangentially - with the developing situation on the diving bell and the motivation for the presence of the scientist to be on the research expedition in the first place. Think about scenes and story

elements that you can frame to highlight these traits. Brainstorming together is encouraged.

Angela is going to be playing Hadara Perahia, an Israeli oceanographer. After a ponder, Charles writes down the following traits: 'I Will Succeed Where My Father Failed': Perahia's father died while doing a similar dive in the Trench and his body was never discovered; 'Israeli Military Officer': the Israelis have an interest in ensuring that the dive fails; and finally 'Xenophobic': Charles is thinking of "The Abyss" film with that last trait.

Swap character sheets again before play begins proper with the first scene.

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Each of you in turn will frame scenes that flit between flashbacks set on the surface - during the journey of the Belasco to the Trench, or even months back while still at University; and pressured scenes set on the doomed diving bell. The mix of scenes set in the diving bell and flashback scenes is up to you, but staggering scenes is encouraged.

One of you starts play by framing the first scene. Framing just means that you describe where the scene will unfold, who is there, and what is happening: you set the stage if you will.

If you are the player framing a scene you must provide opposition to your playing partner. If present, your own scientist becomes a non-player character within the scene. Challenge your playing partner by framing scenes that focus on some aspect of the traits on their character sheet. There is no reason to hold

back, so be as dramatic, brutal, and touching as is necessary. Tailor play to have one or two conflicts per scene.

If you are the player whose scientist is the featured scientist for a scene, you need to role-play your scientist handling the situation that your playing partner is presenting.

Scenes set within the diving bell require both of you to hold each others forearms for the duration of the scene. There is only one exception to this rule: when you are manipulating a die, you may remove one hand from your playing partner's forearm in order to manipulate the die. Your playing partner must still continue to hold onto your forearms.

The need to hold forearms is relaxed during scenes set outside the confines of the diving bell. Breathe easy and reclaim some personal space. You will soon be plunged back into a claustrophobic scene within the diving bell.

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Narrate freely until your playing partner describes something that you do not want to happen to your scientist

The player at the heart of the conflict then describes the intent of their scientist: that is, how their scientist intends to address the conflict. The player providing the opposition for the scene announces a target number based on the dramatic key of the situation at hand.

If the drama at the heart of the conflict is low key, the target number is 5. For regular dramatic action - by your definition of regular - it is 7. For high drama, it is 9.

If the scientist at the heart of the conflict can then weave one of their traits into the narration of intent, the target number drops by one. Only one trait grants this bonus per roll.

To roll, first pick up one die of any size you like from the mound. You may not pick up a die if there is no possible chance of success with that die. (For example, picking up a d6 when the target number is 7.) Roll the chosen die. If you match or exceed the target number, your scientist succeeds in their intent. Suitable narration must accompany the successful roll.

If the rolled die is less than the target number, then the scientist has failed in making good on their intent. Suitable narration must accompany the failed roll. Failure can be narrated as as *"Yes [you succeed in your intent], but..."* if desired.

The player can choose to have another attempt at the conflict in order to make their scientist succeed in achieving their intent. To do so, the player simply picks up another die and rolls as described above. The player can roll as many times as desired until they are successful, give up, or their stack collapses (see next).

The player can choose to give up and not try again, in which case the scientist loses the conflict and the opposing player narrates the specifics of the failure and the outcome.

Regardless of success or failure, every die rolled must subsequently and immediately be stacked. If you, the die rolling player, do not have a stack of your own in front of you, then place the rolled die on to the table in front of you, which then becomes your stack. If you

already have a stack, place the die directly on top of your stack. Over time, a teetering tower of dice will be created in front of you and your playing partner. Since it is slightly easier to stack six-sided dice than eight- or ten-sided dice, this directs you to drive play towards smaller drama that can be addressed piecemeal.

When a stack collapses then a suitably bad and dramatic story twist affects the scientist associated with the relevant stack. your playing partner narrates the twist, which cannot be contested with a conflict.

If you are narrating a twist, use the opportunity to introduce something new and dramatic to the story like a sudden reversal of fortune for the affected scientist. Use this narrative power generously, because certainly you can kill your playing partner's scientist with a twist.

The stack is a pacing mechanism. Just like the hour of midnight paces Cinderella, so too does the stack pace revelatory story twists.

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