DETECTIVES & DUTY

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A Police Procedural System for Pen & Paper RPGs

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DETECTIVES & DUTY is an attempt to bring serious detective work into the world of pen & paper RPGs.

This system was loosely based on *"Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective"*, the 1981 Sleuth Publications game. These guidelines are intended to provide an intellectual challenge to players well-versed in logic and deduction. The guidelines, however, can also support a more kick-in-the-door style of play. A solid case is more difficult but also more satisfying to build when incorporating traditional detective work.

This system emphasizes the challenge to the players above the challenge presented to their characters. Each case should be a challenge, mystery, or puzzle for the players themselves, who must work out the answer or solution based on their own wits and wisdom, rather than simply relying on the attributes of their characters.

Detectives & Duty was developed within the context of 5th edition Dungeons & Dragons, so this document will use the terms of that system – DM instead of GM, 5e terms for skills, levels, and so on. It can, however, be easily adapted to any system.

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Detection

It's important that the players have the opportunity to solve the cases themselves, so serious consideration was given to the question of how to keep this from simply being a string of skill checks, where high rolls always lead to victory, regardless of critical thinking. I hope that these guidelines will help.

The DM rolls all checks in secret. This allows for the same sort of uncertainty that would challenge real detectives. If players have a hunch they've missed something, they have to decide if they want to keep looking. On that note:

Each check may be attempted once per hour. Investing more time into a task gives the player another chance to succeed. Not all cases are time-sensitive, but in general, the resource you're working with is time. Being conservative with your time is an intelligent choice, and this encourages players to make judgment calls without necessarily having all the facts.

How Detection Works

These guidelines operate under a model where detection is composed of three components, each filling its own role and having its own characteristics. Two of them are mechanically important, while the third is realized only through good writing.

PERCEPTION allows the detectives to spy out clues hidden around a location, including clues that are hidden in plain sight. INVESTIGATION answers specific questions about clues they have already found. In 5th edition, these are represented respectively by the skills of the same name.

DEDUCTION is the final aspect of detection, and certainly the most difficult to describe.

The first two skills allow a player to bridge the gap between their own capabilities and those of a professional. A player may be very intelligent, but they suffer two limitations – they aren't on the scene, and most of them aren't trained as detectives. Perception is needed to help them

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pick out tidbits from what would, in real experience, be an infinitely complex scene. Investigation is needed so that their character can answer questions that would be covered by their expertise. Other than these, no assistance is needed, and the rest of a case is left to the players' intelligence.

It can be useful to think of perception and investigation in terms of game objects. Perception focuses on general areas, such as rooms, alleys, taverns, each of which yields up clues. And each clue has certain tidbits it will offer up through investigation, if the right questions are asked – "is this blood, or rust?"

Notably, it is useful to think of **hours** as game objects as well. Games should be run with discrete hours – keeping track of minutes or even half hours muddles the rules and stresses the players for time in a way that opposes the game's aim. They should have time to think and reason, while still being confronted with the challenge of solving a case quickly and efficiently.

Perception

Perception is the aspect of detection that examines the entirety of a scene and picks out those aspects which are most relevant to the problem at hand. It allows a detective to consider only the important information from the complexities of any situation. When considering a crime scene, perception checks will inform the players about what might be useful – there's a bloodstain on the floor, a cabinet is slightly ajar, one of the carpets has been moved. Higher checks will lead to harder-to-spot clues, though less obvious clues are not always more useful.

At its worst, perception is used in isolation – the detective notices the murderer's business card between two floorboards. This case is too easy to solve, and requires no thought at all on the part of the players.

Note that a mystery can be made without perception, where all relevant clues are evident; this is a popular and a clever way to conduct mystery writing.

Two kinds of perception exist. The first is noticing a clue that is difficult to find – the faint imprint of a boot in the dust. The second is somewhat more sophisticated, but also more difficult to write and use. This is noting a clue in plain sight – if the witness said he called the police right away, why did he bring in and open all of his mail? This is part of why perception is such a useful mechanic. A player couldn't notice something in plain sight like this, without its presentation being clumsy and obvious.

When a detective enters a location, the DM should give them the basic layout. This is what a person can see, simply from looking around. Each player may declare, "I choose to actively perceive", which allows them to make a check against the DCs of all the clues in the location. The roll is made in secret, so the detective does not have a sense of how much they might have missed. The DM will then reveal any new clues for which their check beat the DC.

Active perception of a location includes all reasonable forms of search – going through drawers, looking under furniture, checking for secret compartments, etc. This is another example of bridging the gap between player and character skill – a trained detective may have methods of searching for clues that a player would never think of. In short, a player does not need to specify the method or particular targets of their search, only that they are searching.

Note that the thorough nature of active perception means that you cannot do it without making it obvious that you are going over the whole area. Interested parties who are present during a search will be aware of the players' intent and may take action in response.

If the players think that they have missed something, they can re-search **each location** once per hour, as described above. The DM should take extra care to make it clear what they consider the locations to be. In thinking of locations as game objects, each room in a house might be a location, or the entire house and its grounds could be a single location, including the alley behind it. Since each detective may actively perceive each location once per hour, clarity on the number and nature of the locations nearby will allow the detectives to conduct a reasoned and methodical search.

Players can also use active perception against people, for cases where that they think a character has a clue on their person – for example, perhaps if the brand of cigarettes in a person's pockets might be important to the case, or the color of the mud on their boots. These observations might be made clandestinely, or as a full search, at the DM's judgment.

Investigation

Clues are often useless without investigation. The role of investigation is to derive information from specific clues or observations. In order to keep things sporting, the player is required to ask a question about the clue – one cannot simply roll to get all the relevant information. Common questions will sound much like this: "What kind of weapon caused the wound?", "How long has this stain been here?", or "Was the window broken from the inside or outside?" A question that is too general should be denied, and the detectives should be asked to be more specific.

While a layperson will know little of this, a detective will be trained in chemical methods to determine if a stain is blood, estimate how long a corpse has been dead, and so on. You may already recognize that investigation exists along a sort of range. You could call this a continuum of special knowledge. It's hard to even think of an investigation without some knowledge, but common knowledge questions ("is this lemon juice?") are on one end of the continuum. Someone who takes reasonable care could determine a person's approximate height from their footprints, but only expert knowledge could allow them to identify dirt from different parts of the city; one would need to have gained that knowledge beforehand. The continuum also includes skills, such as detecting characteristics from footprints, all the way to special investigations of things like chemical composition and DNA. I recommend that clues be further on the common-knowledge side of this scale. Investigation allows us to bridge the gap between the player and the detective, but solving cases with familiar pieces presents a more immersive intellectual challenge, because it recruits more of the player's own experience.

The DM will have previously determined the information that can be discovered from a clue, so it's possible to get an answer of "You can't tell," even if one's roll is very high. If the DM did not include information about if a victim's handedness (left or right), then that information may not be able to be determined. DMs are encouraged to add additional information on the fly, but the reasonable doubt presented by an answer of "you can't tell" is important to the mystery. Did our player roll too low, or did they ask the wrong question?

As mentioned before, each question may be asked of a clue only **once an hour**. On the other hand, you can ask the same clue multiple questions in the same hour, so long as the questions are different enough. You can also ask the same question of multiple clues. A boot and some footprints might be separately examined for evidence of a person's height.

A player can take 20 on a single question by devoting a full hour to it. They can do this if they've already asked that question, as they are spending a whole hour on it. This is more in the interest of providing a fair challenge than anything else. If the players have both found a clue and know the right question to ask, they should be able to get the information they need. Not for free, of course – invest those hours of investigation wisely! Time will sometimes be limited. Remember that a roll of 20 may not always be sufficient to answer a question, depending on the character's skill.

Allowing a player to substitute another skill for investigation is encouraged, when appropriate. It is very reasonable for a player to use the medicine skill to determine a cause of death, or the survival skill to follow footprints. In exchange for this, it is reasonable to grant a small bonus to the check. Investigation is designed to be a generic skill, suitable for all tasks. But roleplay is an excellent thing to encourage, and specialization makes a lot of sense, especially in large groups. Players should be rewarded when they choose to better define their characters.

The rules outlined here for investigation also can apply to interpersonal checks. The DM shouldn't ask for Insight checks, but a player can use them to ask questions – "Is he lying?"

Deduction

Deduction is hard to define, but it's the essential feature of good mysteries. If I had to take a crack at it, I might describe deduction like this: deduction is the process by which some information is analyzed in such a way that it creates a new clue. For example, observing carriage tracks at the scene of a crime and determining that the murderer must have been a cabby. Even something as simple as deducing someone's height from the mist they wiped away from a mirror is deduction. A clue without deduction points to a specific fact. Deduction adds information which is *necessarily* true, but not available until the leap has been made.

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Police Work

While the intellectual aspect of this system will be the main appeal for many people, the procedure aspect of a police procedural can be its own challenge. It adds a level of complexity and flavor to what might otherwise be a simple puzzle. Balancing these two forces is an important part of gameplay. The DM should do what they can to find the right ratio for their group, and should consider cases that offer varied combinations of these two approaches.

The exact boundaries of what counts as probable cause, what evidence is required for entry of a person's house without a warrant, and similar legal restrictions are important for the tone and flavor of the game. Playing this game in a very corrupt police force, or in a totalitarian state, will be very different from playing in an egalitarian democracy. Each DM should weigh these questions for themselves – consider looking into real-world legal systems and how they handle these issues. Here, I outline the rough approach that I have used, largely based on modern American and English law.

Arrest

Arrest is allowed on any level of probable cause, which is simple enough to get. Any "objective" evidence that a suspect has committed a crime is enough. Possession of stolen or illegal goods, matching a description of a wanted person, knowing information only the criminal would know — all of these are enough for detectives to make an arrest.

Detectives may hold a suspect for up to 48 hours, at which point they must either release the suspect, receive a warrant to hold them longer, or press charges.

The simple fact is that the players have the option to get someone out of their hair for 48 hours if they feel it is necessary.

Search & Entry

Detectives need permission or a warrant to legally search someone's residence or person. If they don't have this sort of authorization, the evidence is inadmissible in court and they may be in legal trouble (see below).

Getting a warrant requires similar probable cause as above. A brief Q&A with a judge is recommended. Don't hesitate to deny search warrants if the detectives have insufficient evidence – building a case around justifying a warrant is an excellent idea.

Use of Nonlethal Force

Nonlethal force is allowed when a person fails to follow the verbal commands of an officer, resists arrest, or attempts to flee.

Nonlethal force generally includes two things in game terms: The first is status effects, such as being blinded, charmed, grappled, or stunned. This includes potentially helpful effects as well – **buff spells and other positive enchantments are forbidden without explicit permission**. Exactly how "good Samaritan" laws work may vary by your setting – casting healing spells is probably protected in most societies – but in general, affecting someone with a status without their consent is a form of assault.

The second is nonlethal damage. Though this mechanic does not normally exist in 5e D&D, I reintroduced it, as I think it adds to the system.

One can deal nonlethal damage with unarmed attacks, with special weapons (e.g. the billy club,

for 1d6 nonlethal), or by attacking with a -4 penalty with any normal weapon. Nonlethal ammunition is available for bows and crossbows, and using this ammunition also takes a -4 penalty.

A person is knocked out for 1 hour for each point of nonlethal damage over their hit point total.

Use of Deadly Force

Use of deadly force is allowed when the person or persons in question are believed to be an immediate danger to people around them – essentially, if they have used deadly force or appear to be about to use deadly force themselves. The police would still prefer that you bring people in alive, however!

In game terms, deadly force is anything that deals normal damage, as well as other deadly effects – e.g. a spell that kills without dealing any damage.

Outside the Law

When a detective breaks the law, performs an illegal search, or uses force in an illegal manner, there may be consequences. If there are witnesses (including suspects or criminals) they may face disciplinary action. They might also be turned in by their fellow detectives.

As with so much else, how this is handled will seriously affect the tone of the campaign. Each DM should decide what sort of setting they want to run. In a very corrupt system, there may be few consequences for this sort of illegal behavior.

The most natural consequences of breaking the law is suspension from the force or, in extreme cases, removal from duty, i.e. being fired. Forcing a player to sit out a game or session is not much fun, though. Making them roll a new character could be enjoyable, but it could also be a major punishment.

This is one reason I enjoy the fact that evidence gained through illegal means can be rendered impermissible as evidence in court. No punishment is more flavorful or appropriate

than illegal behavior keeping the detectives from bringing justice to the criminals they pursue.

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Success and Failure

The goal of a detective is not only to discover who is responsible for a given crime, but also to collect evidence that will eventually assist in a conviction. The detectives can send a person to stand trial at any point, but to ensure success they should endeavor to have as much evidence as possible.

If they have a suspect or suspects in custody, the players may at any point go to the DA and present their suspect(s), along with any pieces of information or evidence they want.

Pieces of evidence each contribute a certain percentage to the success chance of the trial. The total of all evidence will approach but not always equal 100% – sometimes the guilty wriggle free.

Here's the evidence list for an example case:

> **30%**
>   Presented the correct suspect (the murderer) for trial
> **30%**
>   Suspect's handkerchief found at crime scene
> **20%**
>   Victim owed the suspect a substantial amount of money
> **10%**
>   Wounds consistent with the suspect's pocketknife
> **5%**
>   Eyewitness reports seeing suspect in the area that night

These clues and percentages are **not known** to the players – the goal is simply to find as much as they can to put the suspect(s) away. The main percentages are large pieces of evidence; the rest are icing on the cake.

If a trial fails, the suspect is acquitted and returns to the streets. The effects of this will vary by the person and their crime. Crime lords and serial killers may present problems if not successfully convicted.

Evidence obtained illegally (without a warrant, forced confessions, etc.) is not permissible, though the detectives can still present it if no

one is aware of the evidence's source. If they are careful, or fortunate, no questions will be raised.

Note that having the correct person is a large chunk of the trial chance. If the detectives have good evidence but arrest the wrong person, there is a chance they may be wrongfully convicted, but it is unlikely. How to handle this is at the DM's discretion – how it is dealt with will seriously affect the tone of the campaign.

For the rich and powerful, *very* conclusive evidence will often be needed to convict them.

A DM can also choose to waive this mechanic, in some or all of their cases. It is certainly appropriate to the flavor to sometimes receive a full confession, making the trial a formality. Or the DM might consider the idea of snatching victory away after good detective work to be unfair. Even in this case, I would recommend having some sort of checklist of clues required for conviction, a minimum threshold of evidence. Cases could alse be written up so that there are multiple ways to reach a 100% chance of conviction, so that there is a chance to fail, but sufficient evidence will always carry the players over that threshold.

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A METHOD OF WRITING MYSTERY

Writing a mystery, let alone a good one, is a difficult task. There isn't a single correct method, of course. Any approach will be driven by the desires and preferences of the author and their audience. What I present here is an argument for what I think is an excellent angle for writing mysteries. You may or may not agree with my opinion, but this will provide a starting point.

Whether you agree or not, my primary advice is this: Be specific about what you are trying to accomplish in your mysteries, and what makes the genre of mystery interesting to you. If you can articulate these points, it makes the process of writing each case both easier and more rewarding.

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The purpose of detective fiction, and certainly the detective game, is for the reader or player to compare themselves with the platonic "Transcendent Detective". If no perfect solution exists, then we're simply hearing a story *about* some detective. This genre seeks a certain type of retrospection; in a novel, the reader must be able to look back and say, "both I and the

detective had everything required to solve the case from the beginning." Doubly so in a game – a player must look at their choices and either admit, "I had what I needed, but I was not clever enough to use it," or say, "My solution was elegant at every point, because I had what I needed, and I made good calls at each junction." Indeed they must admit, "I never was misled or tricked – everything that happened was due to my own steps or missteps."

This is because the mystery genre, to me, is a challenge for the reader or player to rise to the highest standard of intelligence. In highly random circumstances, intelligence is reduced to mere gambling. We need to give our players enough certainty that they can prove themselves. Mystery should be a chance to account for one's own successes and failures. Some genres can allow for a hero or a player to do everything right and still fail – not so for mystery.

The perfect solution, and the case which supports it, has some necessary features. It is generally possible to solve such a case very quickly. A perfect case could often be solved within 5 minutes of the beginning of the

investigation. Sometimes this means that all the information needed is available at the scene of the crime, but this is not necessarily so; all that is required is that the detective be able to determine, from each set of information, where to go next. In this way, a relatively large case could be constructed – but the path through it would still allow for very efficient advancement of the plot.

Red herrings and false trails are acceptable, even welcome, but they must abide by a similar rule. Whenever a false lead is presented, the detective must have *at that moment* sufficient evidence to determine whether or not is it worth pursuing.

No such case can require a trick or social engineering for its resolution; it will never be necessary to, for example, force a suspect to reveal that they know the nature of the murder weapon, when an innocent person would not. The development of a trick is excellent lateral or interpersonal thinking, and if a case cracks to these methods, that is fine. But every case must always have a path by which it yields to analysis. This does not mean that personal testimony cannot play a role – a similar but more acceptable example would have one of the suspects mention the color of a scarf left at the scene of the crime, when only the killer would have known such a thing.

These features ensure that a "Transcendent Detective", working by observation and reason alone, can always find the solution. The Transcendent Detective sees every clue, determines exactly what questions to ask, investigates unerringly, and makes perfect deductions from the sum of this information. In our game, this detective rolls nothing but natural 20s, and has a +20 to every skill; but deducing the correct questions to ask and coming to the right conclusions are what provides the challenge to the players.

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In practice, these principles may be diluted. I sometimes include truly false leads, for example. But the principles are always remembered. Misleading players too much betrays what is great about the genre.

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A Case Study

"Now this was a case in which you were given the result and had to find everything else for yourself. Now let me endeavour to show you the different steps in my reasoning. To begin at the beginning. I approached the house, as you know, on foot, and with my mind entirely free from all impressions. I naturally began by examining the roadway, and there, as I have already explained to you, I saw clearly the marks of a cab, which, I ascertained by inquiry, must have been there during the night. I satisfied myself that it was a cab and not a private carriage by the narrow gauge of the wheels. The ordinary London growler is *considerably less wide than a gentleman's brougham.*

"This was the first point gained. I then walked slowly down the garden path, which happened to be composed of a clay soil, peculiarly suitable for taking impressions. No doubt it appeared to you to be a mere trampled line of slush, but to my trained eyes every mark upon its surface had a meaning. There is no branch of detective science which is so important and so much neglected as the art of tracing footsteps. Happily, I have always laid great stress upon it, and much practice has made it second nature to me. I saw the heavy footmarks

of the constables, but I saw also the track of the two men who had first passed through the garden. It was easy to tell that they had been before the others, because in places their marks had been entirely obliterated by the others coming upon the top of them. In this way my second link was formed, which told me that the nocturnal visitors were two in number, one remarkable for his height (as I calculated from the length of his stride), and the other fashionably dressed, to judge from the small and elegant impression left by his boots.

"On entering the house this last inference was confirmed. My well-booted man lay before me. The tall one, then, had done the murder, if murder there was. There was no wound upon the dead man's person, but the agitated expression upon his face assured me that he had foreseen his fate before it came upon him. Men who die from heart disease, or any sudden natural cause, never by any chance exhibit agitation upon their features. Having sniffed the dead man's lips I detected a slightly sour smell, and I came to the conclusion that he had had poison forced upon him. Again, I argued that it had been forced upon him from the hatred and fear expressed upon his face. By the method of exclusion, I had arrived at this result, for no other hypothesis would meet the facts. Do not imagine that it was a very unheard of idea. The forcible administration of poison is by no means a new thing in criminal annals. The cases of Dolsky in Odessa, and of Leturier in Montpellier, will occur at once to any toxicologist.

"And now came the great question as to the reason why. Robbery had not been the object of the murder, for nothing was taken. Was it politics, then, or was it a woman? That was the question which confronted me. I was inclined from the first to the latter supposition. Political assassins are only too glad to do their work and to fly. This murder had, on the contrary, been done most deliberately, and the perpetrator had left his tracks all over the room, showing that he had been there all the time. It must have been a private wrong, and not a political one, which called for such a methodical revenge. When the inscription was discovered upon the wall I was more inclined than ever to my opinion. The thing was too evidently a blind. When the ring was found, however, it settled the question. Clearly the murderer had used it

to remind his victim of some dead or absent woman. It was at this point that I asked Gregson whether he had enquired in his telegram to Cleveland as to any particular point in Mr. Drebber's former career. He answered, you remember, in the negative.

"I then proceeded to make a careful examination of the room, which confirmed me in my opinion as to the murderer's height, and furnished me with the additional details as to the Trichinopoly cigar and the length of his nails. I had already come to the conclusion, since there were no signs of a struggle, that the blood which covered the floor had burst from the murderer's nose in his excitement. I could perceive that the track of blood coincided with the track of his feet. It is seldom that any man, unless he is very full-blooded, breaks out in this way through emotion, so I hazarded the opinion that the criminal was probably a robust and ruddy-faced man. Events proved that I had judged correctly.

"Having left the house, I proceeded to do what Gregson had neglected. I telegraphed to the head of the police at Cleveland, limiting my enquiry to the circumstances connected with the marriage of Enoch Drebber. The answer was conclusive. It told me that Drebber had already applied for the protection of the law against an old rival in love, named Jefferson Hope, and that this same Hope was at present in Europe. I knew now that I held the clue to the mystery in my hand, and all that remained was to secure the murderer.

"I had already determined in my own mind that the man who had walked into the house with Drebber, was none other than the man who had driven the cab. The marks in the road showed me that the horse had wandered on in a way which would have been impossible had there been anyone in charge of it. Where, then, could the driver be, unless he were inside the house? Again, it is absurd to suppose that any sane man would carry out a deliberate crime under the very eyes, as it were, of a third person, who was sure to betray him. Lastly, supposing one man wished to dog another through London, what better means could he adopt than to turn cabdriver. All these considerations led me to the irresistible conclusion that Jefferson Hope was to be found among the jarveys of the Metropolis.

"If he had been one there was no reason to believe that he had ceased to be. On the contrary, from his point of view, any sudden change would be likely to draw attention to himself. He would, probably, for a time at least, continue to perform his duties. There was no reason to suppose that he was going under an assumed name. Why should he change his name in a country where no one knew his original one? I therefore organized my Street Arab detective corps, and sent them systematically to every cab proprietor in London until they ferreted out the man that I wanted. How well they succeeded, and how quickly I took advantage of it, are still fresh in your recollection. The murder of Stangerson was an incident which was entirely unexpected, but which could hardly in any case have been prevented. Through it, as you know, I came into possession of the pills, the existence of which I had already surmised. You see the whole thing is a chain of logical sequences without a break or flaw."

- **Sherlock Holmes,**
 A Study in Scarlet

A Study in Scarlet contains a very nice summary, reproduced above, from the mouth of Holmes himself. "Simple as it was," says Holmes, "there were several most instructive points about it." I could hardly agree more. The case is of remarkably simple design, but it is complete and elegant, being an ideal primer on how to write good mystery.

The first thing to note here is that while Holmes makes many observations, and has a good amount of information about the case by the end of his initial investigation, he requires only **two** pieces of information to solve the mystery; he uses the name of the victim to learn the name of the murderer by contacting the Cleveland Police, and he deduces that the murderer was a cabby from the presence of the ruts outside. All other information was incidental. While Holmes learns of Hope's complexion, height, footprints, and motive from clues at the scene, none of these are required at all for solving the mystery, or apprehending the suspect.

The second thing to note is that, though his powers of observation are impressive, Holmes makes only a few true deductions here. He deduces Hope's profession, as discussed in the quote; he deduces his height; he deduces that the blood and lack of struggle indicate a nosebleed, though this one is a stretch. Everything else is merely observed. You may disagree on the exact number of deductions, but at least appreciate that they are fewer than one might expect. Even Holmes works primarily from observation.

Pay attention to what Holmes observes, the clues he finds, questions he asks, and deductions he makes. You will see that the structure of this case fits perfectly into the system described in this document. Consider this example as you go out and write mysteries of your own.

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