

The Zodiac Stone

A gametro, my game-fu is still better than yours entry.

By Vitenka

This game is intended for standard RPG play, either tabletop or – especially – play by post. You'll need a GM, some players, and some tokens. No dice.

You'll also want, of all things, your local newspaper – or some other source of horoscopes.

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Introduction

The Daily Spittlemonger

**Whose dog is singing?
Fabulous prizes to be won! (Pg 17.)**

With the today's release of Patrick Nally (Pg 4.) we are here proud to reprint our original exclusive that lead to his arrest:

Monkey Business

Everyone today has doubtless already been startled with animal stories, but here is one more that might shock you.

Last night, the Jackson Laboratory was broken into and all of the monkeys were released onto the grounds. The ALF (Animal Liberation Front) claimed responsibility. Had last night been any normal night, we would doubtless be covering the front page with this story. If only because it involves monkeys flinging poo at policemen.

But last night all the animals started talking, so this story appears less important. But perhaps it is not.

We were told by one witness, who works as a guard at the site: "They were working on the brain, here! Trying to discover why chimps and cats can't talk, important stuff! These hooligans rushed in and started smashing stuff. I did my best, but it's not like I could have stopped them."

Stop the press!

The police believe that they have found a safehouse used by the criminals responsible for the break-in, and were seen to remove a body.

**Will you be lucky today?
Your stars, read by our stars! (Pg 14.)**

So here is how it went down.

You called yourself a member of the ALF (and why was that? Did you really care about the cause, or were you more interested in hanging out with them?)

The ALF being more a flag of convenience than an organisation, you pretty much did your own thing.

So one dark Halloween evening, you got involved in a raid on the Jackson labs. Broke in, stole some stuff, wrecked some equipment, let all the chimps out - and then bailed out.

That night, you all partied. Smokes and coke. Much drinking.

Shelly, who had organised the thing, got drunk and then got all mystical and stuff talking about crystals and the age of Aquarius. She does that sort of shit, when she's not letting monkeys go.

Then she exploded.

You legged it. Got the hell out of there and puked up and fell asleep.

You woke up with a godawful hangover and your dog licking your ear.

And when he asked when you were going to take him outside for a piss you almost shat yourself.

Since then, things have been different.

Different all over, sure - animals talk and everything gets crazy; but different for you specifically.

Suddenly unless you were very careful, nothing would ever go right. Stuff you KNOW you're good at would just break. And sometimes you'd see things out of the corner of your eye; or symbols graffiti'd onto walls.

And sometimes you'd get deja vu, except everything was slightly different.

Oh, and some people are after you. Plain clothes cops, maybe - except cops don't carry guns.

And did I mention that the government has a new favourite phrase; "Terrorists" to describe you?

Ok, fiction piece over - here's what's going down.

There's a powerful piece of magic, left over from goodness knows when. You've no idea what it is or what it's been called really, but Shelly called it the zodiac stone.

She touched it, and changed the world. Animals (down to the size of mice, anyway - some of the larger spiders) can now talk. And think; though they don't have the same priorities or morals as people do.

Animals aren't, for the most part, *nice*.

This change, oddly, was localised to Britain and those territories which still call themselves British.

Fourteen years passed, and the world is different again.

For the most part, people have settled down about the talking animals. There's a larger number of animal freedom supporters around than before - but the government has cracked down pretty hard. Exporting talking animals abroad is big business, after all.

(And, maybe, there's something more to it.)

Some part of the magic sticks with you. This is both good and very bad. Especially since you don't really know how to control it.

The things you *have* learnt:

1. Your zodiac sign has something to do with it. The astrology printed in one particular newspaper is scarily accurate for you, now.
2. Sometimes, when things are especially bad, you can consciously call on the magic to try and fix everything.
3. The magic is more powerful around Halloween.
4. You can't leave the country. When you try, you wake up the next morning and it's as though you'd never left. (Though you remember vividly leaving.)

Forget that - what do I *do*?

Ah, glad you asked. Well, you probably have a day job. But outside of that, you panic and try to stay ahead of the government. For just a few weeks more.

Because this time, you're SURE you know what made the stone work...

So, whatever you normally do - what you're going to do now is run around, protect yourselves - and hopefully change things for the better again.

If you don't feel like playing the traditional long-form game and coming up with your own campaign in this world (and, frankly, who's got the time nowadays?) here's the short-form one-shot game.

It is three weeks (say three, though exactly how many depends on how much time you've got) before Halloween and you *think* you've figured out how to get the stone to do its big-change thing.

All you have to do is keep the stone out of everyone else's hands for that long.

The game starts with the police kicking down your front door. Go.

Setting

Fourteen years ago, a group of animal activists changed the world.
They let animals talk.

Things went all kablooeey for a while, and everything is still kinda messed up.
You've got magical powers, but they mainly cause you problems.

And people are after you...

Most of the world is pretty much unchanged. Air/port security is quite a bit tougher than now on importing animals - but there's still more than a few people exporting talking animals; often for illegal purposes.

A lot of people can be described as “Vegetarian – between meals”.

Animals can do quite a lot of jobs, and do so. They haven't had a trade union movement yet. Those adverts of chickens running call centres? Those aren't CGI.

Whacko churches declaimed the work of Satan - but most mainstream churches saw it as a chance to recruit. The manger scene is recreated all over.

Part of the government realised what it had lost. Anti-terrorism regulations got brought in much sooner, and there was a great cracking down.

This part of the world is busy having an anti-environmental-campaigner panic and terrorist clampdown.

Characters

Kicker

The first thing you have is what got you going, the thing that kicked you in the pants and keeps you in the group. In the basic game this is “I was involved in that raid and the after-party.”

Bang

The second thing you need is one, or more, bangs. These are things which you *the player* would like to see happen during play. You should pick things where bad things happen to your character – because that's how you charge up your magic.

Flaw

The third thing is that you should have some code. Things that you won't do. Perhaps you're unwilling to cheat, or are a pacifist. Whatever – whatever you choose is a clue to the GM that this should come up in play, in a way that sticking to your guns will make your characters life more difficult. On the plus side, this powers up your magic...

Star Sign

Lastly, we have your attributes and skills and stuff. Except we don't.

Instead, a character in this game has one major thing that defines them. So I ask you:

“Hey, what's your sign?”

Pick a star sign. Any star sign. This will determine what you can do during play – though not in any way that you can predict at this point. Just pick one, ok?

Magic

You start the game with a level2 charge.

System

There are two system elements to play with here.
One for the magic, and one for everything else.

The 'everything else' system first.

This system is simple:

If it isn't important to the action, then you succeed.

If it **is** important to the action – then you fail.

With one exception – if your characters horoscope for the day covers the action, then you can do it.

Your characters *can* and indeed *should* realise this, and are heartily encouraged to take advantage of it.

If you are playing at a tabletop then you'll need a few days worth of horoscopes. If you are playing by mail or forum then you can get them each real-time day.

Getting Hurt

Physical injury is not a real problem, as the magic system will make clear – you should always be able to avoid serious injury (in a strange 'after the fact' way) if you want to.

Worry instead about being locked up, losing relationships, failing to achieve your goals and being made to look stupid.

The magic system.

The stone gives your characters a limited ability to re-write reality, but it has to be charged up first. There are three levels of effect it can produce. (Well, four – but the fourth is powered solely by plot.)

Whenever you want to use an effect, you have to have at least that much charge – and using it uses up *all* of the charge (even if it had more than you needed).

Similarly, when something happens that would charge it up, it only gets the charge if it's more than it currently has – you can't add together small charges to make a big one.

An equal or smaller charge is just wasted. So use your charges up regularly.

Charging up the magic via the stunt system is an *optional* rule, here for if you want a more gonzo game with lots and lots of use of magic.

Level	Charge	Effect
1	Fail at something important, add to the world with your descriptions.	Steal the limelight.
2	Be hindered by your characters code, incorporate some setting element, Do something the horoscope warns against.	Even though you failed, reality thinks you succeeded.
3	Danger to life and limb, something that makes everyone go 'wow'.	Alter reality in a small area, undoing events.
4?	Pretty much anything.

Effect 1 : Limelight.

Failing at something important means “Persuading the dogs to keep a lookout for me” not “Getting a newspaper half-price”. It means it was something worth checking your horoscope for, and failure will inconvenience you.

Stealing the limelight means moving the 'camera' and action over to you – showing what *you* are doing. What you are doing had better be either interesting or further the plot – or preferably both. But this power lets you say “*Ok, shut up talking, it's all about me for a while, now.*”

Effect 2 : Succeed.

You character has something(s) that they really *really* don't want to do. Whether it's a belief that you don't grass up your friends or a belief that eating meat is evil.

Well, whenever you would find life made much easier by throwing these principles to the winds – but you stick to your guns anyway – that's a level two charge.

The effect is correspondingly greater.

Today isn't your lucky day? You can't manage something? You failed?

Well, ok. You know you failed. Everyone in this strange 'blessed by the zodiac' circle knows. But reality?

Reality didn't get the memo.

You failed to swim across the river? You're on the other side anyway. You didn't manage to escape the guards?

Even though they're *right there* they don't catch you. They're talking to one another, scratching their heads and wondering how you escaped.

But it won't last long, so make your escape whilst you can.

Effect 3 : Changes.

Life and limb are endangered. (Not liberty, someone locking you up is *not* enough to trigger this level, and there are some people out there who know this...) Someone has to be actually *shooting* at you, or at least trying to break your limbs.

But the effect...

Over a limited area, say the length of a street – and extending a limited time into the past, say about half an hour – reality is putty in your hands.

Stuff that was there, isn't.

Stuff that happened, didn't.

You remember the past – as do others blessed by the zodiac – but the world has changed and you know the new reality too.

Effect 4 : Rewrite the Rules.

The one and only time that you know for sure that this power was invoked, the person *died*. And it was halloween. And they were holding the stone.

The effect appears to have permanently *changed* reality – with a distinct break; the public *knows* it changed, thought they have no idea of the cause.

And it changed it over the whole of Britain.

And the change appears to be permanent.

GM Guide

Three legs:

1. Action movie: Agents chasing after the PCs who have something they must keep away.
2. Comedy: Come on, talking animals?
3. Chiller: There's some pretty nasty stuff on both sides of animal liberation... Deliberate comparisons to slavery.

If the action gets slow, do something that makes a player use a charge.

If the players are low on charges, throw their bangs at them to recharge them.

Don't be afraid to move on to the next day – players shouldn't be stuck with the equivalent of a bad roll for too long.

Action

If the action gets slow, men in black attack. Initial attacks should be simple and physical – lots of chases and shootings.

Later ones, as they begin to work out the limits of the characters powers should involve co-ordinated attacks and making trouble in more subtle ways.

Keep track of which character is holding the stone.

If things get **really** slow, then start throwing in reality-changes that the players aren't responsible for, let them investigate.

Comedy

There's good mileage to be had from the characters failures and totally arbitrary changes in ability.

Remember, you're never more than ten feet from a rat. Pigeons are everywhere.

There's always an animal nearby, and there's no reason for those animals to not comment on the proceedings; involve themselves – or just try to extort food at inappropriate times.

Remember, animals just don't think the way people do.

Chiller

Animals are used and abused – and have no compunctions about hurting each other.

There is also an ongoing campaign for animal rights – these are real thinking and talking entities, and there are disturbing parallels to the anti-slavery campaigns; including the lynchings.

Interpreting Horoscopes

First, don't forget the golden rule. If you're all enjoying yourselves, then you are doing it right.

Having said that, I guess you'd like a guide.

As a rough rule, the players should be allowed the benefit of the doubt. After all, they fail at everything not mentioned in the horoscope, and about half of the things that are.

Let's have a sample reading (courtesy of 'glamour'):

You are really searching for perfection this weekend. You have a relationship in your sights and you want to make sure that it is the one before you develop it further. You don't like showing your vulnerable side without really good reason. Also, do keep an eye on your physical state over the coming days. You are so excited about something at the moment that you may be in danger of doing too much – you could be over-exercising in the gym, going to too many parties or even trying to sort things out at home. Remember that sometimes it's better to have time for other people rather than getting everything absolutely in place.

Wow. This one's mean. The first big chunk is all negative. Lots of things you can fail at (charging your magic) but not much you can actually *do*. The last bit, though, I would read as being good at social interactions – provided you do it on the spur of the moment.

So this reading won't help you run a marathon (it explicitly says 'physical is bad') and it won't help a long convoluted plan. But it will let you fast-talk some random person into helping you.

Let's try another one (in the stars.com):

It is essential for a Geminian that their partner shares their interests. Those born under the signs of the twins like to see themselves reflected in others. The trouble is that Geminians are constantly looking for change and destruction which can mean that they have many different partners. They need to appreciate that change can occur within one lasting relationship. Geminians value companionship above romantic passion but they must try to stop analysing their emotions as this can seem cold and off-putting to their partner.

Change and destruction? This one is going to give you lots of ways to blow stuff up. Though you'd better not analyse your emotions, or try to work with someone who doesn't share your interests.

Sample Horoscopes

(Trimmed down to just the game bits. You'll have more fun if you look up your own!)

Aries

You might do better to engage with characters in a novel than try to understand what's going on.

You may be on track to finding the silver lining in a difficulty that's caused one friend to run out of steam entirely.

Where finances and/or travel are concerned, you could come across a frustrating situation.

Taurus

The bull in you could come out once more.

You could show determination and persistence and effectively wear someone down by chipping away at an argument or apparent problem.

On another wavelength entirely you could replace or review your current financial status.

Gemini

Once again you might wish to don a detective outfit.

You could lose yourself in a novel.

You could come across a real gem whose music or way with words is compelling.

Cancer

This could be one of your more sensitive days.

You could have moments when you feel as though you might fall down a well of despair.

That might make this the perfect time for clearing dark and damp places.

You might also attract people who're slowly coming back to real-time and help them with the transition.

Leo

The knowledge that you've got this far before only to be disappointed could leave you perilously 'close to the edge'.

Friends and colleagues could find you hard to handle.

Making good nourishment a priority could save the day.

It might also bring you admiring glances from someone who perhaps has never seen your 'medicine-man' sub-personality at work.

Virgo

Join forces and save cash.

Cleaning or clearing could be involved.

An older person who's not functioning too well presently might need you.

Struggle to find items in an unfamiliar store.

Arrange an eye test!

Libra

With the Sun swapping signs, your financial situation could be turned on its head.

At a quite different level, whilst shopping you could find 'perfect' items that change your image.

Scorpio

You could tune in to a gloomy aspect and choose to say nothing until it's past.

You could almost open a branch of 'Removing Obstacles Inc.': with nothing being too much trouble. Of course, all this could be fuelled by a surge of emotional activity: not for the first time you may sense that if you don't do something, then nothing will happen.

Sagittarius

Yet full responsibility might not stop at your door (though you could be implicated as you're part of a group).

You could ask some tough questions and hope that a certain person will accept some of the blame if things go wrong.

You might also be preparing for a sea change at work.

A project that's been in the planning stages for a while now may now be on the launch pad.

Though not your scene, now may be the time to make lists of what still needs to be done.

Capricorn

You might be sensing that change is in the air but hasn't yet been discussed.

A marketing campaign might now be demanding your full attention.

The way words are set on paper could occupy some of your time - as could the Internet.

For some, this could bring discussions about an advertising campaign.

You might also have involvement in the collection of data.

A friend's experience could be really helpful.

Aquarius

Everything around you may seem extremely frustrating in some way.

Letting go of things could be tricky.

The whole process could lead to you uncovering the real reason this situation has developed.

Pisces

They might not like being reminded of a system that went wrong.

This, though, might be your ammunition to ensure that a repeat isn't even considered.

The wistful look someone gives to an item that's been moved could prompt you into thinking of a way to record fresh history.

Ingredients chosen

- Talking animals
 - Major setting element, being the thing that kicks everything off and changes things from 'normal mundane modern life'
- Astrological signs
 - Major system element.
- Artifact
 - Major setting element, being the Maguffin.
- Unique style/form of magic
 - Unique as 'the only' and also being kinda different from everything else that I can think of – major setting and system element.
- Alternate History
 - Kinda claiming this as a minor setting element.
- Halloween
 - Claiming this as a very minor setting element.

Credits

Things what I stole:

“Stunts” from exalted.

“Flaws grant bonuses when they hurt you” from Storyteller.

“Magical charges” from Unkown Armies

The 'skill' system, that's original.

As far as I know, anyway.