HISTORICAL & FANTASY

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SPIES IN RUNEQUEST

To most people, the word 'Spy' immediately brings to mind secret agents such as James Bond, Jason Bourne, or to those of us of older generations, Danger Man, Flint, The Men from Uncle or Mission Impossible. Yet spies and spying is as old as civilisation itself. The earliest historical records of actual espionage are documented in Akkadian and Egyptian texts, whilst the first fictional account of spying comes from the Iliad, where Diomedes and Odysseus are sent to spy on the Trojans, and later on, in one version of the epic, Odysseus enters the city disguised as a beggar and steals the Palladium, a statue of Athena believed to protect the city.

Whilst spying originally developed from military scouting, it soon became an art of its own. Rather than relying on warnings from outlying shepherds about an advancing army, it became more efficient to place spies directly in the neighbouring city or nation so that reports could be sent when the enemy was mustering in the first place. From there it was an easy step to seek out news concerning mercantile patterns, political activity and public opinion, allowing a greater degree of strategic planning. Armed with this knowledge foreign alliances could be forged, economic leverage applied, or even false information planted. An illuminating insight of these espionage methods can be found in the *Arthashastra* written in India in the 4th century BCE.

Since espionage has been an inherent part of both literature and history since ancient times, it places spies and spying firmly within the bounds of genres normally used in *RuneQuest* campaigns. But suave super-agents like Flint or Bond aside, what exactly is a spy? And how can they be used in a campaign?

TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY

At the most unsophisticated level a spy is merely someone who obtains and passes on confidential information. In most circumstances such persons have little need for specialist training, merely needing to keep their eyes and ears open, and then report what they discover.

Thus a travelling tinker is perfectly positioned to gather intelligence, being a well travelled migrant of low status who passes beneath the notice of local authorities. Likewise a skilful tailor would be well placed to report on both the economic situation of his city and the loose gossip overheard when catering to rich patrons of the ruling elite.

If a spy cannot be transposed into that culture, then regular payment of bribe money or threats of blackmail often loosens lips of native inhabitants. Indeed some spies are merely persuasive individuals who convince others to perform the dangerous task of gathering the information for them, which they collate and send back to their superiors.

A few spies perform other duties than the simple passing on of information. Sabotage and assassination are two specialities of the spy, seeking to damage the infrastructure or political stability of those they are spying upon. These tasks require expertise in techniques of stealth and combat, making them more the provenance of those trained in the military.

The most difficult role is that of the true covert agent, someone specifically taught a diverse range of skills so that they can penetrate foreign cultures, organisations or cults without revealing their true nature. This requires mastering the arts of linguistics, disguise and deceit to present a false persona; as well as other skills which might include literacy, forgery, cryptography, or even the ability to pick locks depending on the setting.

At the head of any web of espionage is the spy master, the person who analyses all the information, emplacing or moving operatives in their network, even sacrificing them to send false information to an enemy. They keep watch on the operatives of their organisation, control the finances, and most important of all, sell gathered intelligence to their employer.

In ancient times the first spy-networks were usually orchestrated and controlled by private individuals. Many high ranking Greek and Roman officials were supported by a personal web of business associates, informers, clansmen, slaves, and even criminals bound to them by patronage. The feared Speculatores, trusted military couriers and covert agents commanded by Julius Caesar, were some of the first professional agents, but were still paid for out of his own family coffers.

Similar spy networks can be found in many fantasy books. The fanatically loyal clan spies in the *Empire Trilogy* written by Raymond E. Feist and Janny Wurts; or the brothel spies employed by Lord Baelish in the *Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R. R. Martin. Even some historical novels can be of great use as inspirations, *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling being a fine example of espionage, set within the colourful backdrop of Victorian ruled India.

LIVE AND LET DIE

Whilst the concept of spies is fascinating, they can be tricky to introduce. At first glance, spies are not likely to be encountered in a campaign unless the game is built around court intrigue or politics. In fact it is difficult to get players to develop any depth of feeling towards spies unless they themselves are directly harmed by them. For example:

THE SPY OR SPIES...

- uncovered dire secrets that caused the character's family to fall into dishonour
- forced a trusted ally to turn against the characters at a critical moment
- assassinated a ruler which caused the character's home city to be overrun and destroyed
- are being used by the characters' most hated enemy to unjustly maintain a position of authority
- is blackmailing one of the characters to pass on confidential information which will eventually be traced back to them

Spying is easier to introduce into a game if the player characters are the spies. Even here there are ways of making an espionage mission a stressful, possibly unwelcome, burden, forcing characters to question whether or not they really wish to risk breaking diplomatic courtesy or betray a well liked ally out of loyalty to the authority sending them on the mission. In such games the characters need not be trained as spies per se, but merely apply their own skills and cunning.

The ultimate level of espionage campaign would be to recruit the characters into a spy network, so that they are trained in a myriad of crafty skills and deadly combat techniques. Such *Mission Impossible* style campaigns are the epitome of fun and are easy to translate into almost any setting, whether historical or fantasy. Use the adjacent tables to quickly craft the source, nature and possible target of a player character mission.

DAY OF THE JACKAL

Whilst skills and training are of paramount importance to spies, they often require unusual tricks or techniques to help keep their work covert. The tradition actually comes from ancient times when such tools were in use by spies whose own safety depended heavily upon them. Here are a few examples..
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Carrier Pigeons: A better way of passing messages is not to be caught carrying them in the first place. Thus the trained carrier pigeon was an excellent way of isolating oneself from discovery, whilst also speeding delivery times

1d10	Person Requesting Mission
1	An Ally (as per *RuneQuest* page 34)
2	A Contact (as per *RuneQuest* page 34)
3	The character's last employer
4	Someone saved by the character
5	Wealthy merchant or banker
6	Emperor, Caliph, Maharajah, or Tyrant
7	Enemy spy who lies about their origin
8	High ranking military officer
9	Repressed or impoverished commoner
10	Bureaucrat of the character's native culture, nation or city

1d10	Possible Target or Villain of Mission
1	High ranking priest, scholar or guildmaster
2	Neighbouring ruler
3	Foreign spy of dubious origin
4	Ambitious military officer
5	An Enemy (as per *RuneQuest* page 34)
6	A Rival (as per *RuneQuest* page 34)
7	A member of the character's family
8	Someone injured by the character
9	Official of an enemy culture, nation or city
10	Rebellious citizens or commoners

1d20	Mission Objective
1	Rescue a prisoner
2	Kidnap an important person
3	Capture an enemy official
4	Steal a secret plan/treaty/religious item/weapon design/crafting technique
5	Plant false evidence
6	Scout out and map a particular location
7	Discover location of a person, group or material source
8	Identify enemy behind recent activities
9	Infiltrate a dangerous cult or organisation
10	Protect an individual from being assassinated
11	Assassinate a particular person
12	Smuggle money or equipment to another spy
13	Collect report from another spy
14	Sabotage a political treaty, trade deal or criminal activity
15	Intercept and capture an enemy agent
16	Destroy a bridge, city gate, armoury, guild house, fort
17	Set up a new ring of informants
18	Poison a well, granary, or livestock
19	Investigate odd, perhaps even supernatural, happenings
20	Prevent outbreak of a war, summoning of a demonic god, or some other cataclysmic event

– assuming the pigeon arrives. Many cultures trained birds of prey to attack lone pigeons in case they carried secret missives.

Ciphers: Substitution ciphers swap letters in an alphabet (or substitute symbols) to obfuscate written text. Another early method used a scytale, which used parchment or papyrus strips wrapped around a wooden cylinder, upon which the message was written so that when the strip was unravelled, the sequence of letters became a confused jumble.

Concealed Weapons: Of more use to those on infiltration or assassination missions in settings where bearing of arms is not commonplace, weapons can be disguised to appear as other objects. They could be as simple as a ring concealing a deadly poisoned prick, or as complex as collapsible hand crossbow, its pieces disguised as a personal valet grooming kit.

Double Sided Clothing: A trick to throw off discovery or pursuit, it utilises lined clothes which can be turned inside out, so as to present a different colour or style of garb. Reversible hats and cloaks take only moments to switch.

False Tablets: Another infamous technique used by the Greeks was to write a message on the wood of a wax tablet, before pouring the wax onto its surface.

Hidden Pockets: A trick not limited to spies, such as sewing coins or documents into the soles of footwear for instance; or tucking small valuables into the lining of cloaks or coats where a slight bulge would not be noticeable.

Invisible Ink: First used by the ancient Greeks and Romans, the sap of the tithymalus plant was a natural invisible ink, which revealed itself when heated.

Poison: Although not so widespread or lethal in the real world as popularised, poison really comes into its own in a fantasy setting. Not all poisons need to kill, some fantastical creations could be fashioned as truth serums, knock-out drops, paralytics and so on.

Scalp Writing: Shave a man's head then write the message with dye or henna and wait for the hair to grow back. Such methods are not suited to urgent messages however!

Secret Compartments: Similar to hidden pockets, some articles can have small recesses into which objects can be hidden; the false bottom of a storage chest being the classic example.

Silk Pellets: Another way of passing information without openly carrying any potentially condemning items was developed by the ancient Chinese who wrote messages on scraps of silk, which were scrunched up and covered with wax, then swallowed.

Snakes: One of the earliest assassination tools of early history, a venomous serpent has the advantage of potentially being a natural accident, disguising a premeditated murder.

Stained Eggs: An unusual technique that requires painting alum dissolved with vinegar onto the shell of a boiled egg; something many cultures carry as part of a packed lunch. When peeled the message shows up on the solidified egg white!

AN ARMY OF SHADOWS

Before adding spies into your campaign, it is wise to design the organisation for, or conversely against, which the characters are acting. In *RuneQuest* a spy network can quickly be created using the *Brotherhood rules*.

The following example details an antagonistic group of nefarious cultists and agents who seek to overthrow a kingdom in preparation for the return of the Sorcerer God-Kings. Whilst designed as a fantasy organisation which could be slipped into any established Sword & Sorcery game, with minor changes it could be modified to fit a historical campaign, as either antagonists or protagonists, modelling for example the Hashishiyya, the Sicarii or the Vedic Spasa.

Name: Brotherhood of the Noiseless Whisperers

Nature: Created centuries ago, the brotherhood was formed as the vanguard of the near extinct serpentfolk's return to rule over the world. Since their numbers are few, they cannot utilise military conquest, but instead have spent years gathering knowledge of primitive human cultures so as to locate a weakness they may utilise. The brotherhood has now firmly established itself in many cities, corrupting the weak willed, fanatic or vengeful to its cult. In time they shall launch these fifth columns to overthrow humanity and rule over them as their masters.

Organisation: The brotherhood maintains a strict policy of secrecy, with members of each rank kept isolated from higher up echelons save for a single contact to prevent being betrayed by a double agent or a captured member tortured into revealing sensitive plans. The spy ring maintains several cells of informants and their coordinating handler in each major city, whilst agents (saboteurs, assassins, couriers and the like) act as free roaming operatives. The top level spy masters analyse reports, passing on conclusions to the Grand Master who acts as the final cut-off between the brotherhood and its sorcerer overlords, which remain safely hidden in several remote and secret mountain fortresses.

Membership: All membership requirements are standard, as per the *RuneQuest* rules.
- *Informants (Common Members)*
  These are the rank and file of brotherhood members recruited from the poor, dispossessed, or politically ambitious humans. Clueless, hardly any even know that the world was once ruled by the serpentfolk. Most spy for money or protection, but some are idealists believing that their efforts will be fundamental in overthrowing the current regime. A few are reticent members, forced to hand over secrets under threat of blackmail or violence.
- *Handlers (Dedicated Members)*
  Operatives that organise each cell of informants; recruiting members, gathering their information, paying gratuities and bribes, then writing preliminary reports and leaving the information in dead-letter drops (covert places where higher ranked operatives can collect it without being observed). Most handlers are city locals; humans promoted due to their intelligence or social position.
- *Agents (Proven Members)*
  Free roaming spies trained in covert action, including sabotage, assassination, theft, planting of false evidence, or even imitating a key individual via the use of disguise. Most agents have one or two specialities which they are more suited to, but that of subterfuge is always of paramount importance. Most are human, trained up through the ranks to perform the most dangerous missions, but a handful of the best agents are serpentfolk, hidden beneath illusory magic.
- *Masters (Overseers)*
  Brotherhood spy Masters are the regional administrators of the spy network. They coordinate the pyramidal operative structure beneath them, requesting certain information, collate and analyse it, then issue orders to available agents based on what has been discovered. In addition they provide necessary training for handlers and agents, from within their shadowy hooded robes, worn to conceal their serpentine features.
- *The Grand Master (Leader)*
  The grand master is merely the puppet of the Sorcerer God-Kings. Utterly ruthless, the head of the brotherhood travels between the regional spy masters, receiving reports and passing down the commands of the waiting overlords. The identity of the grand master is unknown to his or her subordinates, fulfilling the role of executioner to terminate any master or agent who acts treacherously.

Restrictions: All lower ranking spies fear the promised reprisals against their family, business or selves if they should ever betray the organisation, or even let slip its existence. All swear an oath to fulfil the commands of their superior, no matter how apparently suicidal they might be, convinced that any dependents they leave behind will be cared for.

Skills: The brotherhood favours (and trains) the *Standard Skills* of – *Conceal, Deceit, Influence, Insight, Perception, Stealth, Willpower;* and the *Professional Skills* of *Culture (Other), Disguise, Language (Other), Literacy, Lockpicking, Lore (Cryptography or Forgery)*, and *Seduction*. Only *standard skills* are taught to Informers. The brotherhood has its own *Noiseless Whisperer combat style (Garrotte, Dagger, Thrown Dagger* and *Crossbow – Assassination trait)* available to members of Agent rank and above.

Magic: If suitable for the campaign setting, brotherhood members have access to all the *Folk Magic spells* available to the Agent career. Serpentfolk operatives may have items or enchantments magically altering their appearance.

Gifts: Polyglot, Resilience

Allies and Enemies: The Brotherhood of the Noiseless Whisperer is feared by the rulers and governments which it seeks to overthrow. However, the brotherhood's extensive intelligence gathering network causes them to be sought out by nefarious individuals, to who they sometimes sell secrets in return for gold or favours.

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Hopefully this article has shown that espionage can be easily and legitimately introduced into almost any genre of game, even in settings where technological gizmos, magical powers or martini swilling gamblers do not exist. Spies can be great encounters during an adventure, especially as reoccurring foes, and can be an ideal source of hints or clues when player characters become stumped.

Remember that in a world where information is power, the spy is king!