

CRISIS ON CHRISTMAS

CREDITS

A *Mutants & Masterminds* Holiday Adventure

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Special Thanks: To all the players and fans of *Mutants & Masterminds*, who have helped to make the game a success and provide hours of fun and enjoyment for themselves and their friends.

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INTRODUCTION

What the heroes hope to be a peaceful holiday season turns decidedly strange when Mr. Infamy threatens the beliefs and hopes of children across the world, by holding Santa Claus hostage! If something isn't done, the world may be denied the hope and joy of the Christmas season.

Crisis on Christmas is a light-hearted holiday adventure for the *Mutants & Masterminds* Superhero RPG. It is intended for a group of four to six power level 10 heroes, although the Gamemaster can scale the adventure to make it suitable for higher or lower level heroes by increasing or decreasing the power levels of the challenges as appropriate.

The adventure is set in *Freedom City* (described in the second edition of the *Freedom City* campaign sourcebook available from Green Ronin Publishing). Although *Freedom City* is recommended for running this adventure, it is not required. All the necessary material is included here and in the *Mutants & Masterminds* core rulebook.

ADVENTURE SUMMARY

Mr. Infamy is a mysterious granter of wishes and dark desires, provided those wishes are selfish or have the potential to cause harm or mischief in the world. While the sinister salesman's victims are usually adults,

Mr. Infamy does not discriminate; he seeks out despair and anger wherever they may be. In this particular case, they're found in the heart of Heather Combs, an eleven year-old girl who lost her family the previous Christmas. Alone in an orphanage, she fervently wishes the holiday would never come at all, and finds her wish granted when Mr. Infamy gives her the power to hold Christmas hostage, making the whole world forget it even exists!

Fortunately for the world, Earth's Master Mage, Adrian Eldrich is safeguarded from such manipulation. He seeks out the heroes and asks for their aid in overcoming this threat, by sending them into the realm of dreams and myth to rescue Christmas from the clutches of the mysterious woman called the Desparia. But if they fail, they may be trapped forever in her cold clutches.

PLOT-DEVICE CHARACTERS

As noted on page 211 of *Mutants & Masterminds*, it's often easier to treat some characters as plot-devices rather than defining (or limiting) them with game stats. Mr. Infamy is one such character; he's an instigator, rather than a foe the heroes confront directly. Although Eldrich has game stats in *Freedom City*, they're not relevant in this adventure and he can also be treated as a plot-device character.

SCENE ONE: T'WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE...

Read or paraphrase the following to the heroes:

Late December and winter have settled upon Freedom City like a dark, grey shroud. The leaden sky sprinkles a layer of grimy snow onto the streets and creates a chill that settles into your bones and spirit. It's clear the people of the city feel it, too, as they huddle into coats and scarves, scuttling about their business, scarcely even looking up to the grey sky above. Night is coming, and there seems little to look forward to except another evening of patrolling the streets for signs of trouble, which have become increasingly common, but really, what else can you do?

If any of the players ask exactly when in December it is, mention it's the early evening of December the 24th. If any of them note that it's Christmas Eve, or ask about the holiday season or Christmas in any fashion, just give them a blank look and say, "Christmas? What's that?" Indeed, make it clear the heroes, at least, have no recollection of any such holiday or time of the year, nothing that breaks up the endless monotony and bleakness at the start of the long, dark winter months.

Before the players have too much time to wonder about this oddity, read the following to them:

Sure enough, you haven't long to wait for trouble to arise. An alarm sounds from the Eastern Seaboard Bank at the corner of Nelson & Bridwell downtown and police sirens whine in the distance. There's trouble!

A group of six thugs (thug archetype, *M&M*, page 229) are robbing the downtown branch of the E-Sea Bank. They're armed with pistols and wearing stocking masks and their getaway car is running outside the building. Needless to say, the robbers are not prepared to deal with an entire team of superheroes; treat them as minions, meaning one hit is enough to take them down. The encounter isn't really meant to challenge the heroes, just give them a little warm-up and the opportunity to show off their powers.

If you want to make things a bit more of a challenge, you can have the thugs assisting a supervillain or two. Possibilities include Rant & Rave (from the *M&M* demo adventure *The Heist* on page 236), Downtime, Fear-Master, or one or more of the members of Larceny, Inc., from *Foes of Freedom*, or any of the lower power level villains from *Freedom City* Second Edition. The Kung-fu Killer or Sinister Simian from **Chapter 11** of *M&M* are also good options.

SCENE TWO: THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS' PAST

Once the heroes have mopped up the bank robbers, read the following aloud:

There is a shimmer in the air in front of you, and you brace yourselves for more trouble. What could it be now?

The shimmer takes the form of a man in a long, flowing cloak of dark blue, clasped at the throat with a circular silver amulet with a triangle inscribed inside it. You recognize him immediately: Eldrich, the Master Mage! His image remains translucent, as he spreads his cloak and holds out a hand towards you.

"My friends," he says in a hollow and spectral voice, "I have paused this moment in time to reach out to you." Indeed, as you glance around, you see everything and everyone else frozen, motionless. Even scatterings of snowflakes hang still in the air.

"There is a great disturbance in the natural order," the master mage says. "Some force has disrupted reality and things are not as they should be. I have been barred from returning to Earth's dimension, flung into the nether realms, but I have managed to send my astral form to you. I need your aid to right this disturbance and restore the cosmic balance. If you help me, then quickly take hold of my cloak."

If the heroes refuse Eldrich's call for aid, the master mage's astral image fades away, and time returns to normal. Feel free to add some scenes where the heroes deal with increasing levels of crime, violence, and neglect in the city on what should be Christmas Eve. Make it clear that any spirit of joy, charity, or kindness seems to be bleeding away, leaving Freedom City grey and lifeless. Then you can have Eldrich's astral form reappear to make a last, desperate plea for help.

When the heroes touch Eldrich's cloak, it feels only faintly substantial. The world swirls around them like a blizzard and they are instantly whisked... elsewhere. Read the following aloud to the players:

A chill wind swirls around you and the world fades as if behind a wall of snow and mist. When it clears, you find yourselves standing outside on snow-covered ground in a mountain pass of some sort. Eldrich's phantasmal form hovers above, a look of strain on his face.

"I have expended my energies," the master mage says. "I must return to my physical body at once, in hopes of navigating the netherworlds. The forces that have upset the natural order are close at hand. It is now up to you, my friends. You must put things right once more!"

Before you can respond, Eldrich's astral form fades and is gone. A cold wind swirls through the pass, whipping up the snow, and thunder rumbles somewhere in the distance.

Although he hasn't time to explain to the heroes, Eldrich has in fact transported them to another plane of reality, a kind of deep "dream realm" where the archetypes of human myth and consciousness are real. In particular, they are near a mythic representation of the North Pole, the home of Santa Claus! Initially, the world appears quite normal, but things quickly make it clear the heroes are *not* in Freedom City any longer.

One particular thing the heroes discover immediately is their movement powers don't work: they can't fly, teleport, run at super-speed, and so forth. This is because of the unique nature of the realm. The same is true of any unusual sensory powers like ESP or Telescopic Vision, which allow the heroes to sense beyond their immediate area. There's no immediate explanation why these powers don't work, they just don't. So, for the time being, the heroes have to make their way through the pass on foot.

SCENE THREE: ELF-HELP PROGRAM

As the heroes make their way through the pass, they're affected by Desparia's increasing influence over the realm and set upon by her hobgoblin minions. Fortunately, they get some aid from an unexpected quarter.

Read the following aloud to the players:

The air is freezing cold in the mountain pass and you're wishing Eldrich provided you with some winter gear before he disappeared. The snow reaches up to your knees and it's slow going trudging through it to who knows where. It's rapidly growing darker as night begins to set in and you have the disturbing feeling that you're being watched.

As the rough stone sides of the pass loom up overhead, the wind whistles and moans through the narrow gap. Suddenly, burning red eyes gleam from the shadows and a pack of grey-furred wolves with eyes like burning coals rushes to attack!

The winter-wolves are Desparia's minions, ordered to keep intruders away from the North Pole and the Workshop. Use the wolf archetype on page 232 of *M&M* as a basis, with Immunity 10 (cold effects) and Protection 5 (for a total Toughness of +7). There are at least twice as many of them as there are heroes, at least. What's worse is the wolves' attacks appear to ignore mundane defenses. Powers like Force Field and Protection are useless against them, providing no reduction to their damage. The heroes should discover this the first time they are scratched by a wolf's claws or teeth. The creatures are not immune to counterattack, but they are supernaturally tough. The heroes should put up a good fight, but they should also feel outnumbered and out of their depth.

If the fight against the wolves begins turning against the heroes, or if the heroes gain a significant edge over their opponents, read the following aloud:

Suddenly, from the rocky crags up above, comes a volley of missile fire! One wolf is struck by a half dozen darts tipped with suction cups and falls over in the snow. Another is pelted by water balloons, which begin instantly freezing its fur, while others are bombarded by snowballs, foam-darts, wiffle-balls, footballs, soccer balls, and a variety of other things. Howling and shying away from the rain of attacks, the wolves quickly withdraw.

"That's got 'em," a high-pitched voice says from above you, "but they'll be back soon enough."

You glance up to see a small figure, about three feet tall, standing on an outcropping of rock, hands on his hips. He's dressed in a bright green coat with brass buttons, red and white striped stockings, and curly-toed green shoes. A jaunty green hat rests on his shock of red hair, supported by a flaring pair of pointed ears. Similarly dressed little figures emerge from cover behind the rocks.

"What's the matter?" the little fellow asks with a broad smile. "You look like you've never seen an elf before."

The heroes' rescuers are indeed Santa's elves, or at least those elves that escaped Desparia's takeover of the Workshop. They've been hiding out in the wilderness and organizing resistance, but haven't been able to do much more than evade the sorceress' minions. With outside aid, however, they may be able to do more.

The red headed elf and leader of the small band of rebels introduces himself as Herbie, although the other elves all call him "Doc." (If any of the heroes happen to ask Herbie what he's a doctor of, he curtly answers "dentistry.") The elves are holed-up in a nearby cave in the mountains, where they've stockpiled various toys they use as weapons against Desparia's minions.

More importantly, the elves have a small amount of Santa's magic corn, which Herbie correctly suspects will restore the heroes' powers, at least temporarily. It tastes like candy-corn and allows normal use of any movement or sensory powers and makes the heroes' protective powers fully effective against Desparia's minions and magic.

SCENE FOUR: ASSAULT ON SANTA'S WORKSHOP

Once the heroes are ready for action (either due to the elves' magic corn or by completing their quests), Herbie tells them the situation. Read or paraphrase the following to the players:

"It all happened just a few days ago, but it seems like forever. We were getting things ready for the big Christmas run when she showed up. Came right out of a swirling blizzard, she did, with those wolves and her hobgoblin soldiers. We tried to protect the Workshop, of course, but she's a sorceress and her power..."

Herbie sighs deeply. "She calls herself Desparia. She captured Santa, and Mrs. Claus. He told us to run, to save ourselves. We went out into the storm, and all you could hear was her laughter on the wind, mocking us. We need to free Santa and the Missus, but we need your help."

Herbie explains the basic plan: the heroes create a distraction, drawing out Desparia and her minions, while an elite group of elves slip into the Workshop to free Santa and Mrs. Claus. Let the players offer suggestions

EXTENDING THE ADVENTURE

If you want to make *Crisis on Christmas* more of an extended adventure, you can give the heroes additional things they need to do before they're capable of taking on Desparia and her minions and freeing Santa and Mrs. Claus. Rather than the elves having magic corn on-hand to restore the heroes' powers, perhaps they need to seek out other places in and around the North Pole. They might also need special items or magic to take on Desparia and win. The elves can tell them where to go, and can perhaps even loan them some flying reindeer to get them there, but it's up to the heroes to get the job done.

Possible additional scenes include:

- Finding and freeing Santa's flying reindeer, perhaps so they can carry the heroes to their other destinations.
- A visit to the Island of Misfit Toys to recruit allies against Desparia or even find the one special misfit toy in need of a friend who can melt the ice-maiden's heart and help her reject Mr. Infamy's "gift."
- Seeking out the snow-witch or winter-wizard of the North who can cast a spell to restore the heroes' powers. Such aid may come with a price tag attached (sending the heroes off on yet another quest).
- Finding the Abominable Snowman (a yeti-like monster) and getting a bit of its fur (perhaps for the aforementioned spell). Alternately, the heroes might need one of the Snowman's teeth (in which case Herbie's dentistry skills may come in handy). The Snowman could be a terrible monster or actually just misunderstood and in need of some friends.
- Rescuing a little girl who represents Desparia's lost childhood innocence. When she's brought into the presence of the ice-maiden, then her cold heart melts and she regains some of the hope she has lost.

Feel free to include other scenes to extend the adventure and customize it to suit your group and your *Mutants & Masterminds* campaign.

and their own plans. They can investigate or attempt some reconnaissance, if they'd like.

When the heroes want to create a distraction, all they need to do is offer a show of power, or even just appear within sight of Santa's Workshop, to draw the attention of Desparia and her minions. The sorceress confronts the heroes, proclaiming loudly how they cannot defeat her and Christmas will never come. Her not-inconsiderable Toughness and Magic power rank make Desparia a formidable foe. Feel free to use GM Fiat to provide Desparia with enough successful saving throws to weather the heroes' initial attacks, and to allow her to overcome some of the heroes with her powers.

Keep in mind Desparia's minions will also be acting to trap the heroes and protect their mistress. While they are just minions (unlike the winter-wolves in the first encounter of the adventure) the sorceress effectively has as many of them as she needs.

Desparia: Use the Corrupt Sorcerer archetype on page 214 of *M&M* with the following spells as Magic power feats: Blast 18 (icy cold), Cold Control 18, Emotion Control 18 (despair and fear), Fatigue 12 (ranged), Obscure 18 (visual, swirling snow), Paralyze 12 (ranged), Snare 18 (icy bonds), Suffocate 12 (ranged), Summon (her hobgoblin and winter-wolf minions), and Weather Control 18 (winter weather only).

Hobgoblins: Use the Gargoyle monster archetype on page 233 of *M&M*, without the Flight or Immunity powers. The hobgoblins are vaguely ape-like creatures, with thin limbs, distended bellies, and heavy green fur. Their faces are distorted with rage and their eyes burn with an unholy yellow glow.

SCENE FIVE: IN THE (SAINT) NICK OF TIME

Let the fight against Desparia and her minions play out for as long as it's interesting, or until one side clearly gains the upper hand, then read the following aloud to the players:

Suddenly, the howling wind dies down, the growls and grunts of Desparia's minions are silenced, and a single voice booms out.

"Ho, ho, HO!" laughs the jolly old elf in the red suit trimmed in white fur. "What have we here? You've been a very, very bad, sad girl Heather. Do you want to ruin Christmas for all the boys and girls out there?"

"Why not?" Desparia cries out, face twisted with anger. "It was ruined for me! Why did my mommy and daddy have to die? Why?"

Desparia's tall, pale form seems to shrink in on itself, becoming more like a thin little girl with a tear-streaked face. In a burst of black smoke smelling of brimstone, a dapper man dressed in a dark suit appears, one eyebrow raised in a sardonic expression.

"Because life isn't fair, my dear," he says. "Not for you, anyway, so why should it be for anyone?"

This is primarily a roleplaying scene. Once Mr. Infamy appears, the players should have some idea of what's going on. If they don't, play out the conversation between Heather, Santa, and Mr. Infamy a little longer, until they understand "Desparia's" motives better.

The two main openings for this scene are the heroes losing and the heroes winning. If the heroes are losing to Desparia when Santa Claus makes his appearance, then the sudden arrival is enough to disrupt her concentration on any spells and free the heroes from any snares or other malign magical effects. It also halts the attacks of Desparia's minions for the time being. If the heroes are winning, having struck Desparia with an attack powerful enough to stagger her, for example, then the appearance of Father Christmas (and then Mr. Infamy) puts a stop to further hostilities for the moment. The revelation that the "evil sorceress" is just a sad little girl should restrain the heroes' desire to simply beat her into submission.

The ideal way of handling the problem is, of course, to encourage Heather to deal with her pain and reject Mr. Infamy's gift of power of her own free will. While interaction checks are entirely appropriate, you don't have to make it all about which character has the higher Diplomacy or Charisma bonus. Let the players offer heartfelt speeches on the true meaning of the holidays, family, and forgiveness.

Mr. Infamy, naturally, plays devil's advocate (literally), countering the heroes' arguments and encouraging Heather to take up the power at her command and wipe out Christmas once and for all. Still, the terrible tempter's words ring hollow sooner or later. All he really has to offer Heather is vengeance and power over her monstrous minions. He can't give her real happiness or a family to replace the one she lost.

In game system terms, Desparia has an initial attitude of hostile (toward everyone). The heroes need to get her to a helpful attitude, a DC 45 interaction skill check. You can allow them to do things in stages, if you want. For example, a check result of 25 gets her to indifferent, where it only takes another DC 25 check to reach helpful. But, as mentioned previously, it shouldn't all be about die rolls and skill bonuses. Encourage players to use the hero points they earned during their battle earlier to help persuade Heather to help them.

If the players falter, or seem intent on using brute force to solve the problem, you can have Santa Claus step in to offer a word or two of

fatherly advice. The old fellow certainly won't condone the heroes using violence against a confused young girl, and you can be certain that Mrs. Claus will soundly scold anyone who even contemplates it! It's best to allow the heroes to do the convincing rather than having Santa step in to save the day, but it's an option, if you want a quick and easy ending to the scenario.

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL!

Ideally, the heroes manage to convince Heather to reject Mr. Infamy. He vanishes in a puff of smoke, telling the heroes they haven't heard the last of him. Santa and Mrs. Claus invite the heroes and Heather into their home while the elves quickly get to work preparing Santa's sleigh. After all, it's still Christmas Eve, and there's a lot to be done!

You can find ways for the heroes to help out, perhaps using their powers to get things ready for Santa's late-night run. For an additional twist, perhaps Mr. Claus needs some assistance this Christmas Eve, or is even unable to make the trip himself and in need of a "pinch-hitter" in the form of the heroes! You can describe the superheroes circling the globe to deliver toys and good cheer to people around the world, all in a single night.

When it's all said and done, Santa, Mrs. Claus, and the elves all thank the heroes for their help. A swirl of snow seems to rise all around them, and the characters suddenly find themselves in their own headquarters (wherever it might be). It's Christmas morning, and the sun is shining brightly over a pure white blanket of new-fallen snow as the world seemed filled with holiday good cheer. The heroes friends and loved ones are on-hand to welcome them and wish them a happy holiday, and they catch a glimpse of the ghostly astral form of Eldrich, offering them a wink and a nod of congratulations before fading from sight.

Industrious heroes may follow up on the question of what become of Heather Combs. Checking with the Danvers Orphanage in the city reveals Heather has been placed with a foster family intent on adopting her. If the heroes don't follow up on the matter, they get a hand-written note from Heather not long thereafter, thanking them for their help in overcoming her sadness and moving on with her life.

If you want, you can even offer one or more of the heroes the opportunity to adopt Heather as a ward or foster child. If Mr. Infamy merely awakened some latent psychic or mystical powers in her, then Heather could even become an apprentice or kid sidekick to a hero!

Wrap things up with the heroes sharing some holiday cheer with their loved ones, and perhaps offering to do the same with the children of the Danvers Orphanage, extending the joy of the season, and wishing everyone a happy holiday!

GOOD CHEER!

Hopefully, you'll share **Crisis on Christmas** with friends in celebration of the holiday season. You may want to liven up the adventure by running it in conjunction with a holiday party, by serving seasonal snacks and treats (cookies, candy canes, mulled cider, and hot cocoa, for example), or even having a "secret Santa" gift exchange among the members of your gaming group! You and your friends can also celebrate by offering a small donation to the charity or good cause of your choice, whatever you would have paid for an evening of roleplaying entertainment.

All of us at Green Ronin Publishing are glad to bring you this special holiday adventure and the fun and excitement of the World's Greatest Superhero RPG year 'round. From all of us, to all of you, a very happy holiday season and a joyous New Year!

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