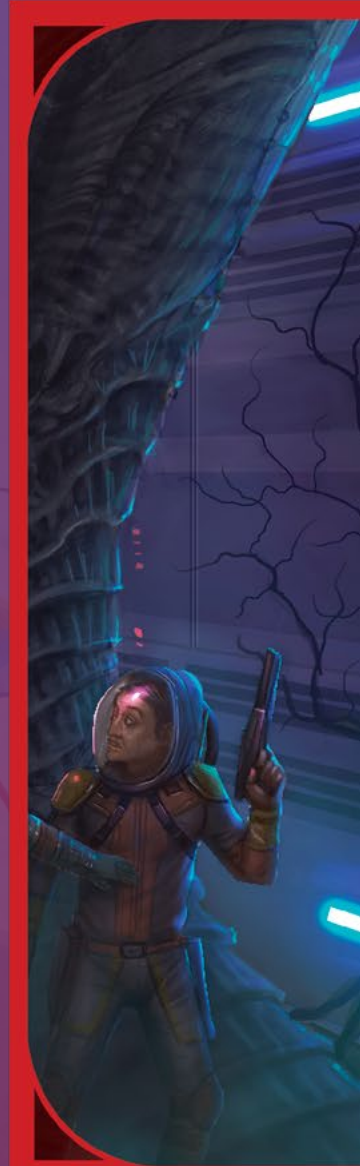
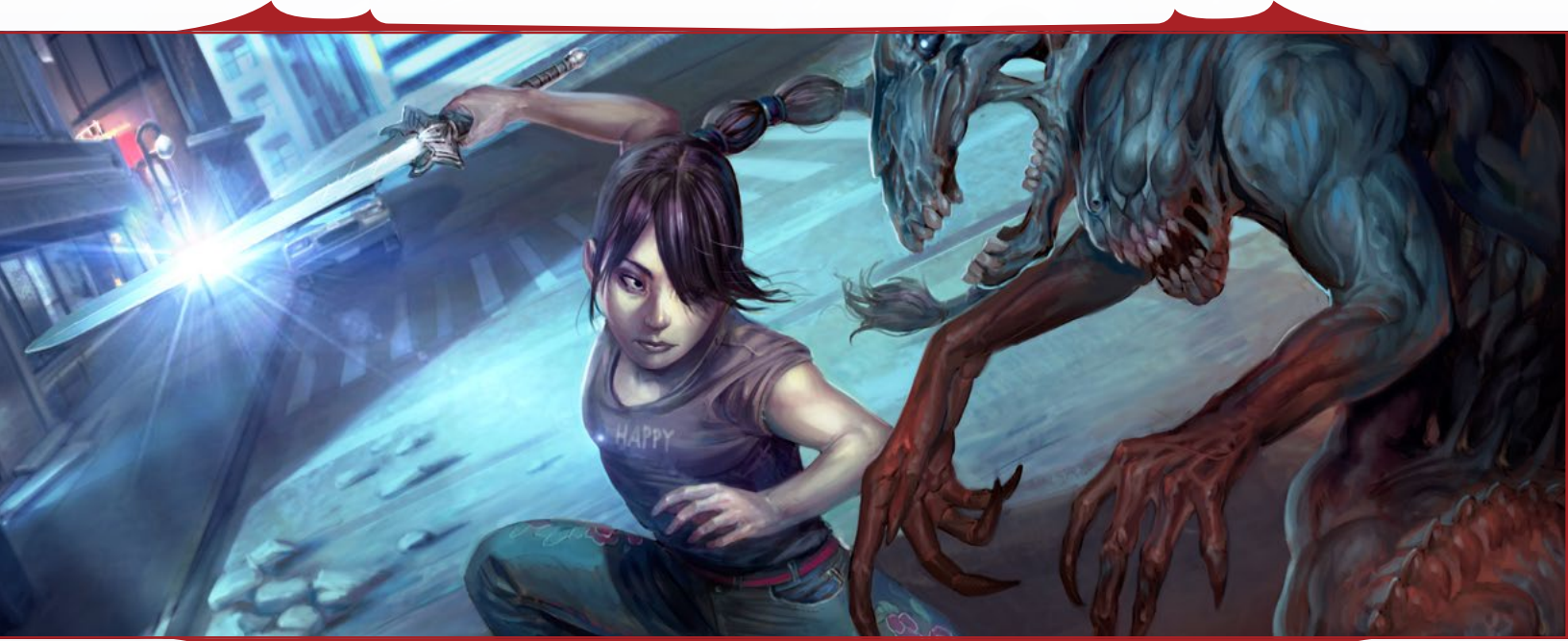


CYPHER SHORTS



By Monte Cook

CYPHER SHORTS



Cypher Shorts is a supplement for the Cypher System. You need the Cypher System Rulebook to play.

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Cypher Shorts are what we call quick and easy adventures for use with the Cypher System. The idea here is an adventure with very quick character creation and minimal GM prep, designed for a one-shot game that can be finished in a single session of three to four hours. If a typical campaign is an ongoing television series, think of a Cypher Short as a movie. In most films, the characters are immediately and directly involved in the situation, things escalate quickly, and then everything wraps up with some kind of satisfying conclusion.

Cypher Shorts exist so you can play games on very short notice. They're also great for situations such as:

- when the group wants to experiment with a new genre
- when the group wants to do something really weird, different from the normal campaign
- when someone new wants to try their hand at GMing
- when the group wants to play a game where normal people get caught up in something extraordinary
- when the GM has a great idea, but it's not a campaign idea

There are some key concepts to a Cypher Short that you'll want to keep in mind if you're playing, running, or creating one for yourself. They include:

- Very simple characters that are immediately involved in the situation. No long expository lead-ins, no "meet in a tavern" scenes.
- Characters have clear objectives, and there's no thought to character advancement. This is a one-shot game, and we aren't concerned about what came before or what comes after.
- There is less of a *plot* than there is a *situation*. *Plot* implies a linear direction: "This happens, then this, then this." Cypher Shorts are meant to be framed more like: "You're involved in this situation, so what do you do?"
- Just as players should use improvisation to react to and deal with situations they didn't know were coming, the GM should be ready to do the same.

Trapped in Flames is a sample Cypher Short adventure on pages 8-9.

CHARACTER CREATION

Cypher Shorts use an abbreviated character creation system, even simpler than the standard Cypher System. This is to help players move quickly, without spending a lot of time deciding between this focus and that one. Careful consideration while building characters is perfect for a campaign, but Cypher Shorts are meant to have quick setups. A working knowledge of how standard Cypher System [character creation](#) works really helps with this, but it's not required.

Before the players make characters, the GM should brief them on the general setting, the time period, or the genre. For example, the GM might say "This is going to be a horror game set in a modern skyscraper," or "This is a fantasy game set in a woodland where dark fae creatures sometimes roam." Then the GM presents the character options for that specific scenario. In the vast majority of cases, the players will take on the roles of characters directly involved in the setting, not outsiders coming into the setting. So in the horror game example, the characters might be office workers, custodial staff, or security guards (or a mix of all three) in the skyscraper. In the fantasy game, a couple of them might be villagers, one might be a woodcutter, and one could even play the woodcutter's dog. Cypher Shorts sometimes allow for character options that wouldn't be interesting to play for a whole campaign, but are fun for a single session.

The following character creation guidelines are very broad, designed to work with any genre or situation. In a specific Cypher Short, it's likely that only the [type](#) choices will be detailed, using the information here as a starting point. [Descriptors](#) and [foci](#) are general enough that they'll work with almost any scenario. Sometimes, though, a Cypher Short might require adjustments to suit the situation.

Just like in the standard system, characters end up with a sentence to describe themselves: "I am a [blank] [blank] who [blanks]." All players start with a score of 9 in their stat [Pools](#), with 6 points to divide among them as they wish. They have

an [Edge](#) of 1 in a stat of their choosing. [Recovery rolls](#) are 1d6 + 1, and characters have an [Effort](#) of 1. (Otherwise, don't worry about tier.)

All characters start with 1 XP.

DESCRIPTORS

A descriptor quickly and easily distinguishes the character from the others. Ideally, no two players have the same descriptor.

Tough: Add +3 to Might Pool. You are trained in Might defense rolls.

Quick: Add +3 to Speed Pool. You are trained in Speed defense rolls.

Smart: Add +3 to Intellect Pool. You are trained in Intellect defense rolls.

Skilled: Add +1 to Intellect Pool and choose three skills in which you are trained. These skills cannot be related to combat or interaction.

Charming: Add +2 to Intellect Pool. You are trained in persuasion and deception.

TYPES

This is the role the character will have in the story. Types will likely change from genre to genre, particularly the type names. So in this section, we'll talk about them in terms of the general role the character will have in the story, not what players will write on their character sheet (although a few example suggestions are provided).

PERFORMING PHYSICAL ACTIONS

This character might be called a Warrior, a Soldier, a Jock, or a Construction Worker (just to name a few), depending on the situation. Choose two of the following abilities:

- Use any weapon without penalty
- Wear armor without penalty
- Stun an enemy as part of your attack, forcing them to lose their next action (costs 1 Might point)
- Trained in two of the following: climbing, jumping, running, swimming
- Add +2 to recovery rolls



Edge, page 15

Recovery roll, page 218

Effort, page 15

Creating your character, page 14



This supplement includes page references to various subjects accompanied by this symbol. These references are to the *Cypher System Rulebook*, where you can find additional details about that item, place, creature, or concept. It isn't necessary to look up the referenced items in the book; doing so is an optional way to provide additional information to your players.



Types, page 20

Descriptor, page 38

Foci, page 60

Stat Pools, page 15


Defense roll, page 23

SNEAKING

This character might be called a Thief, a Scout, a Street Rat, or a Slacker (just to name a few), depending on the situation.

Choose two of the following abilities:

- Trained in stealth and disguise
- Trained in perception and deception
- Trained in lockpicking and disabling alarms, traps, and other security devices
- Add +2 to recovery rolls

SEARCHING AND DISCOVERING

This character might be called an Explorer, a Detective, a Scientist, or a Middle Manager (just to name a few), depending on the situation. Choose two of the following abilities:

- Trained in perception and **Intellect defense rolls**
- Trained in **Might and Speed defense rolls**
- Trained in two of the following: climbing, jumping, running, swimming
- Trained in knowledge-based skills (history, biology, geography, and so on)
- Add +2 to recovery rolls

TALKING

This character might be called a Diplomat, a Priest, a Con Artist, or a Salesperson (just to name a few), depending on the situation.

Choose two of the following abilities:

- Trained in perception and deception
- Trained in intimidation and interaction
- Distract someone, preventing them from acting for as long as you focus on them (costs 1 Intellect point)
- Add +2 to recovery rolls

WIELDING SUPERNATURAL POWERS

This type isn't suited to all scenarios, obviously—it depends on the genre. This character might be called a Psychic, a Wizard, a Superhero, or a Mutant (just to name a few), depending on the situation. The player and GM will have to briefly work out the specifics together. Choose two of the following abilities:

- Possess one offensive power (mental attacks, ray blasts, starting things on fire, and so on) that affects foes up to long range and either deals up to



4 points of damage or causes them to lose their next action. Costs 3 stat points (probably Intellect).

- Possess one defensive power (force field, metal skin, super speed, and so on) that either grants you +3 Armor or eases defensive tasks.
- Possess one miscellaneous power (moving things with your mind, flight, creating a duplicate of yourself, and so on). Costs 3 stat points (probably Intellect). You'll have to come up with some reasonable parameters. You can choose this option twice.
- Have two **power shifts**.
- Have another power shift.

FOCUS

A focus determines the actions a character might often take in the story.

Fights: You're a fighter. All of your attacks are eased, and you add +1 to your damage.

Plans: You think things through. You are trained in defense rolls, and you can choose two other noncombat skills in which you are trained.

Helps: You help other characters. You can use an action to ease everyone else's action if they're within short range (costs 2 Intellect points). This can represent comforting, giving advice, or physically enabling them, depending on the character and the situation. You're trained in first aid.

Provides Information: You're very knowledgeable. You are trained in three knowledge-based skills (history, biology, geography, and so on). You can ask the GM a question that has a pretty simple answer and get that answer (costs 3 Intellect points).

Provides Comedy Relief: You're funny. You can use an action to allow everyone to recover 2 points to their Pools in between each recovery action you take. You're also trained in Speed defense and stealth.



Power shifts, page 292



Works With Tools (or Machines): You're trained in the use of two different skills involving tools and machines. You can modify an existing machine or device to do something other than its original function (costs 2 Intellect points).

Uses Powers: This focus won't fit every genre. You can choose one of the abilities listed under the Wielding Supernatural Powers type. (Note: if that is already your type, you can't select an ability you've already chosen, with the exception of miscellaneous powers.)

THE SCENARIO

When thinking about a Cypher Short scenario, think in terms of what you would expect to see in a movie. And not just any movie, but one where the action mostly takes place in one (probably large, hopefully interesting and dynamic) location. Think of movies like *Alien*, *Die Hard*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Poltergeist*, *Jaws*, *Arrival*, *The Martian*, or *Titanic*. It's best to avoid ideas that are epic, like *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, or *Saving Private Ryan*. An awesome screenwriter and director can fit those kinds of stories into two hours, but as gamers, we probably can't.

THE SETUP

This section of a Cypher Short is a brief overview of the setting and the premise of the situation. As stated earlier, the basic statement of the genre and setting should be given to the players before they make characters.

Then, during the setup, the players get a more specific look at things and can figure out their place in it all. An important question to ask is "Why *these* people?" Why are the player characters the ones in the thick of things? If the setup involves a haunted carnival, why are the PCs the ones involved in the mystery or horror, and not all the other people? Is it late, just before the carnival is closing, and the characters have reasons to still be there? Does the carnival have a terrible reputation, so no one ever goes? Is the fact that no one is around part of the mystery?

The setup also probably includes the instigating circumstance. In the dark fae example mentioned earlier, the GM might describe the beautiful countryside, the foreboding woods, and the quaint village before getting right to the action, wherein a man is screaming because his child is missing, snatched away from the edge of the woods while picking berries. The PCs are the people nearby who hear his calls for help. One of them sees that the branch of a tree has been twisted into an unmistakable fae sign. What are they going to do?





POSSIBLE ENCOUNTERS

This section is a list of possible encounters that might happen in the scenario, depending on what the characters do, where they go, and so on. Cypher Shorts don't rely on a keyed map or a detailed outline of a plot. Think of these as the possible scenes of your movie. More than likely, the group will have time for only five or six encounters in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the ones that best fit the way the game seems to be going.

Each encounter is presented with a trigger, meaning that it is triggered by some action of the characters. So if the PCs in the horror scenario decide to follow the trail of blood they find in the skyscraper, that's a trigger for an encounter. It might be an encounter with the killer, or it might be the scene of a murder, complete with the grisly remains of a victim.

Each encounter comes with the relevant game stats: the challenges for common tasks the PCs might attempt, the levels of NPCs involved, and other information not related to game stats, such as the answers to the questions the PCs might ask, the personality of any relevant NPC, and so on.

GM INTRUSIONS

Each Cypher Short comes with a brief list of **GM intrusion** suggestions that are specific to that scenario.

Remember that GM intrusions are the only way for players to earn XP in the scenario, so they're really important. At the same time, they will probably spend any XP they get. So there might be more calls for rerolls using XP in a Cypher Short adventure than you're used to in a standard Cypher System game.

THE CONCLUSION

Ideally, as with a movie, the end of a Cypher Short session comes to a nice story conclusion (though not every ending needs to be a happy one). Hopefully, the main situation has been resolved one way or another, and the implications of what probably happens next for the characters and the setting are self-evident. But with a Cypher Short, we don't worry too much about what happens next. It's a one-shot scenario. (In theory, you could do a sequel Cypher Short, but you might also consider using the full rules in the *Cypher System Rulebook* and make standard characters if you want to keep using them.)



GM intrusion, page 237

TRAPPED IN FLAMES

Cypher System Character Sheets available for download here:

montecookgames.com/store/product/cypher-system-character-and-campaign-sheets/

No one has any special equipment other than the typical: a cell phone, car keys, a half-drunk coffee, and maybe a briefcase with papers and pens or a tablet computer.

All random people in the building are level 2 or 3 NPCs.

Checking cell phones: PCs can reach their loved ones at first, although this provides no real information. If they're able to get through to emergency services, they are told that emergency responders are on their way and to stay put. It's too soon to get much information from the internet, although a few minutes after it happens, there are reports of an explosion in the building on either floor 10 or floor 12. Building Wi-Fi is down. Data and phone usage becomes spotty about five minutes after the explosion and can't be relied upon.

The Premise: The characters work in a tall skyscraper. Suddenly, there's an explosion, and the fire alarms start ringing!

CHARACTER CREATION

The characters should be relatively mundane people. No supernatural powers. Cypher Short character suggestions include:

Office Worker: This is probably someone with the Sneaking type. The player should figure out the character's name, a very short personality brief, what company they work for, and what their job is: data entry, customer service, accounts manager, and so on.

Middle Manager: This is probably someone with the Searching and Discovering type. The player should figure out the character's name, a very short personality brief, and what company they work for.

Salesperson: The Talking type would work well for this character. The player should figure out the character's name, a very short personality brief, and what company they work for.

Custodial Worker: This could be a Performing Physical Actions character, or possibly a Searching and Discovering character. The player should figure out the character's name and a very short personality brief. They have keys to most of the doors of the building and know the layout well. They might also have something like a mop and wheeled bucket, or a cart with various cleaning supplies, if the player wishes.

Security Guard: This is probably someone with the Performing Physical Actions type. The player should figure out the character's name and a very short personality brief. They have a weapon (a nightstick, a taser, or perhaps a handgun), and keys to most of the doors in the building. They know the layout well.

THE SETUP

The characters all work in a tall skyscraper that houses many different businesses in a large city. They don't necessarily work together or even know each other. But they're all in a large lobby on the twenty-fifth floor, in front of a bank of four elevators, waiting for one to arrive. (A custodial worker probably is cleaning nearby rather than waiting for the elevator.) Suddenly, they hear an explosion, and the floor shudders and shakes. The fire alarms start ringing, and the power goes out, followed quickly by emergency lighting switching on, giving the area dim light.

Obviously, the goal for the characters here is to get to safety. A safety-conscious person (like a security guard) would know that the safest thing to do is stay put, at least until the location of the fire is known (going down into smoke and flames is how many people die in high-rise fires).

What the PCs don't know (yet) is that a terrorist has planted a number of bombs in the building. One of them went off prematurely on the tenth floor. There are more bombs, designed to bring the entire structure down. And because the bomb exploded early, the bomber is still in the building.

Other facts:

- The floor the PCs are on has only a few other people on it currently.
- It will take about ten minutes for first responders to arrive. They will take positions around the base of the building, and, after determining that the fire is on floor 10, will evacuate floors below that and set up on floor 8. This will likely take ten to fifteen minutes. During this time, authorities will attempt to contact anyone on floors above 10 and tell them to stay put, so office phones and some cell phones will start ringing. It's very likely that more bombs will go off at this time, with rescue workers recalled for safety.
- Emergency services will be jammed with calls.
- The elevator cabs all descend to the ground floor and no longer function.
- Whenever the fire spreads to a new floor, the sprinklers will go off. This is enough to keep the fire from spreading too much or too quickly, but the incendiary bombs make it impossible for the sprinklers alone to put the fire out.

POSSIBLE ENCOUNTERS

Staying Put: People from higher floors start coming down, alone or in small groups. Some of them claim to have information. Some of it is true and some isn't. Things they might try to say include:

- A gas main broke, and not only is there a fire danger, but the building is also filling with gas. (This is false.)
- This is a terror attack! We have to get out of here at any cost! (This is true, although this NPC has no evidence or details, and the hysterical panic they feel probably doesn't help.)
- Something crashed into the building! (This is false.)
- Terrorists are in the building, killing and kidnapping people. (This is false, for the

most part. There's just one bomber, and he's trying to sneak out.)

- Rescue teams are on their way up. (This is false.)
- Rescue teams are landing evacuation helicopters on the roof. (This is false. It might be a tactic they try eventually, but it's not happening yet.)

Most of the NPCs coming down from above continue down the stairs to lower floors, with or without the PCs.

Going Up a Stairwell to the Roof: There is a pregnant person on the stairway who can't be moved. Helping them deliver the baby safely is a difficulty 3 Intellect-based task and will take about twenty minutes.

Reaching the Roof: There are a few other people on the roof, but no rescue workers. Eventually, a small helicopter flies overhead, and if the bomber is not visibly present, it will circle but not land. This is the terrorist's accomplice in a small two-person helicopter. The pilot is level 3 and has body armor (+2 Armor), a handgun, and a knife. If the bomber is present, the helicopter will land very briefly to try to rescue him.

Going Down a Stairwell: The PCs hear cries for help as they pass by a floor. If they investigate, they find an office close to the stairs where someone is trapped underneath a very heavy shelving unit. It is a difficulty 4 task to rescue them. They are level 2 and their leg is quite injured.

Going Further Down the Stairwell: Three people stand in the stairwell and tell the PCs to go back up. They say it's not safe to try to evacuate, and the PCs should go back up to higher floors. They won't take no for an answer. They will argue with the characters, and trying to win that argument is a difficulty 7 task. They will use force to back up their point—they won't try to harm the PCs, but they will try to physically block the characters. Getting past them is a difficulty 5 task. Individually, they are each level 3.

Going Even Further Down the Stairwell: Smoke! The stairwell is quickly becoming a chimney, even before the PCs get close to the tenth floor. Visibility is almost nil (treat as complete darkness) and characters must succeed at Might defense rolls each round or suffer 2 points of damage and lose their next action. The difficulty level starts at 2 but increases by 1 every other round.

Fire! If the PCs descend to the eleventh floor, they find fire rages there (and it extends down to the ninth). The explosive(s) are incendiary and designed to start hot fires that can eventually bring the building down. Characters on these

floors must make Speed defense rolls each round or suffer 6 points of damage. Even characters who succeed at their rolls suffer 3 points of damage from the heat, flames, smoke, and lack of oxygen.

Firefighters to the Rescue: Eventually, the firefighters make a clear and relatively safe path out of the building through one of the stairwells, and they work to get everyone out. This is a great time for one last GM intrusion, or for the PCs who have seen the bomber to spot him trying to sneak out posing as a victim—perhaps as they exit the building.

GM INTRUSIONS

Explosion: First and foremost, the GM's best tools in this scenario are the subsequent explosions from more bombs. The bomber has planted many bombs throughout the building, and they can go off any time, any place. This isn't just one GM intrusion, but several, and they come in two varieties:

Close explosion: One or more PCs are threatened by falling debris (difficulty 5). Speed defense rolls are required; otherwise, victims suffer 6 points of damage and are trapped and need to work to get free.

Very close explosion: All PCs must succeed at Speed defense rolls or suffer damage as mentioned above. Even those who succeed suffer 3 points of damage. Plus, there are smoke and fire dangers in the immediate area, as described in the "Going Even Further Down the Stairwell" encounter. Wherever the PCs are currently, that place is not safe. More debris will fall, floors will collapse, and fire and smoke will spread. If the PCs are on the roof, this might mean there's a risk of being blown off!

The Terrorist: The PCs spot the bomber setting another bomb. He is a level 5 NPC with body armor (+2 Armor), a handgun, and a knife. He'll fight, but mostly he just wants to get away. A GM intrusion allowing him to get away from aggressive PCs means they can encounter him again somewhere else. Eventually, he tries to get to the roof and signal his ally in the helicopter to pick him up. Failing that, he ditches his gear and tries to get out with the rest of the victims when the firefighters arrive.

THE CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the PCs very likely just want to get to safety. When they do, the scenario is pretty much over. They're wrapped in blankets by firefighters and loaded into ambulances. If they stopped or apprehended the bomber, the authorities will want to talk to them, and they will be hailed as heroes in the press.



It's not hard to imagine how you could modify this scenario slightly for the science fiction genre using a space station rather than a skyscraper. You could also have one of the PCs be an undercover FBI agent on the lookout for the terrorist, or even an undercover foreign agent working for the terrorist.