

# *The Care and Feeding of 'Dragon in the Poplars'*

(aka How to GM it- by Meg Hilko)

## **A Synopsis of The Game.**

(Spoilers included. Do not read if you plan on playing it)

Dragon in the Poplars will be a high emotion LARP set in the world of 1940's Los Alamos. Players will be scientists, technicians and the occasional other person that worked in the secret laboratory that brought the world the first atomic bomb.

"Tickling the Dragon" was a euphemism used for the process of slowly moving two pieces of radioactive uranium together, measuring the radioactive output to determine the amount of uranium that would provide the energy necessary for an atomic reaction. It was a highly dangerous job, and was conducted beneath the town of Los Alamos (or 'The Poplars' as its translated) in an out of the way laboratory. Due to the secrecy of the project, those who were working there did not always know what it was they were doing. There were even a few civilians, mostly wives or older children of scientists, who were brought in to do some of the less technical or important roles.

For this LARP, we'll be reconstructing a highly questioned incident in Los Alamos's past. Supposedly, an incident occurred where a laboratory employee was exposed to fatal radiation during the course of an experiment, a claim long denied by the powers that be and not supported by evidence.

The characters will be members of two different teams who are working simultaneously on slightly different projects. Plenty of politics will exist as always happens with two groups working in small spaces. Tensions will be high, the pressure on both of those groups to produce results having slowly gotten to them. Their projects are key to the success of the overall project. Without their results, the entire project could fail. Quite literally, the fate of the world is on their shoulders, and while some don't know it, others feel it far too heavily already.

The room will be set up as two rooms: a standard laboratory and a shielded, smaller area that "radioactive materials" will be handled in. The LARP will begin with a few scripted moments, and then disaster will strike. Power has been cut to the area, causing the technicians to tragically overstep the bounds of the experiment, drowning the shielded room in toxic radiation. Safety measures will click into place, locking the players in the room. Their lives may depend on how they react in the next few hours. The LARP will then run for the duration of the "power cut". Problems that will arise and have to be dealt with will include their own distrust of each other, containment issues, and perhaps the most powerful of all, radiation sickness.

Radiation is a misunderstood creature in our society. Its name is feared by many, cursed by many others. Back in the 1940's, radiation and its effects were not as commonly understood as they are now. Today's populace is far more aware of the results that would occur if someone was to be hit with a toxic dose of radiation. It is my hope that I can fuse that fear with the characters of the 1940's and bring about the sense of panic that no doubt many would feel if they were in this situation today. One of the goals of this LARP is to prey upon our fears of radiation, allowing people to experience their fears in a controlled space.

My expectation is that this will be a highly emotionally charged LARP. Beyond the obvious worry for comrades, these will be people who will be dealing with radiation sickness with almost no medical staff or supplies to help them. In addition, the only light in the room should be provided from the "radioactive material", a prop brought by the GM (No, it's not radioactive in any way), creating what I hope will be a tense atmosphere. While they will need the radioactive materials to see what is going on, it will undoubtedly be a constant reminder of what has just happened.

### **The Nity-Gritty Running of the Game**

A few things to bear in mind.

This LARP has mature subjects, the potential for violence, and a lot of emotional stirring.

This is a full immersion LARP for 15 characters. Try not to cut out anyone as they all have vital roles to play.

Each Character Sheet comes with a Security Clearance and a 'What you know about Radiation'. The Radiation Explanation should *\*NOT\** be given to the players straight away. This and a copy of the mini-play (page 4 of the Larp page) should be kept separate until later on in the game.

### **Room Layout:**

Layout of the room is pretty vital. You want to split it into two rooms- your standard room and the experiment room. I suggest having the experiment room longer than it is wide (for reasons that will become obvious later). You also need to have the split be manageable as a crossing chamber (2 chairs works well). (See Map at the bottom of this guide) In addition you may want to have tables representing various stations in the room.

**Props:** This can be as proppy or as not proppy a larp as you want.

### *Required props:*

'Glowing radioactive material'- I used a sun jar. It has an eerie glow and looks cool. 'Gun'- Nerf variety is good. This is for Private Gonzales

Flashlight- preferably an big heavy one that could pass for being old. This is also for Private Gonzales.

*Optional props:* Ledgers, papers, lab coats for 12, nurse outfit for Kay, army outfit for Private Gonzales. I chose not to go this far as I wanted it to be easily portable but this could even be done as a full costume larp if you so chose.

Note: do NOT have 'hazmat' or other radiation-proof suits. It kind of defeats the purpose of the game.

This is designed to be played within 3 hours. Here's the breakdown of how that goes:

**10min** People come in, people get characters, people read characters. All good and normal. You can go into an overview or recap of the setting of the LARP, about Los Alamos etc. Because much of this will be played in the dark, I wanted to give characters a chance to actually speak to each other and get comfortable with who's who.

**10min** Start by breaking them up into the two teams and 'the others' as is described on the "What you know about others" page. Have them introduce themselves around and say who they are, what they do, what role they have etc. Team Leads can go to town with a pep talk or whatever.

**20min** Then bring them back all together and go into a social function get together. This can be described as follows: Army and civilians don't usually mix well. Civilians generally want liberties that security conscious military men find too informal. Nevertheless, the citizens of Los Alamos did manage the occasional social get-together. Now is one such event. This is your chance to mingle and get to know the people on the other teams who you would already know. This should give them enough time to mingle and get to know who's who as well as firming up their own characters in their minds.

**10min Break time.** Wrap up the social and tell the players to take 10 minutes to do whatever they need (bathroom, food, water) and to be back in the room ready to be in character and in that room for the duration of the LARP. If you feel it necessary, explain to them that this will be a full immersion LARP from Time In once they return.

You take this time to make certain the room is perfectly setup and that everything that might be tripped over is put away etc. (Note: I found it prudent at this point in time to corner the player playing Tony Gonzales and tell him that once I gave him the signal to turn out the lights and that from there on in the lights wouldn't work and the door was solidly shut.)

**10min** Once everyone is back hand out the mini-play and the Radiation Explanation to everyone (making certain that people get the right ones!!). Allow them to read it and then put everyone in position. **(See Map at bottom of this explanation)** Launch into an explanation along the following lines:

"The room is laid out as you see it. Two rooms exist. The experiment room and the main room. This is the 1940's. As such, the computers you have and the equipment that monitors things are primarily all in the experiment room and are the size of a table. Portable hand-held devices, beyond a clipboard and pen and paper, don't exist. There is no CCTV and guard does not have a radio.

The experiment is laid out like this. Radioactive material is at the end furthest from the door between the two rooms. Closest to the door is where the Readings Station is. There is a door that has a timer on it to get through. It can only take 2 people at a time. In order to pass through the door it takes 20 seconds (Note: I used 2 chairs at the ends of the table separating the two 'rooms' which players had to sit in). It is possible to see into the Experiment room, and to hear what's going on in there and vice versa.

Despite what you the player may know personally, keep in mind this is the 1940's. Radiation was not considered bad at this time. What you know is what is has been given to you.

You are going through your normal workday. Outside, the canyon is howling with a wicked wind and both rain and hail are intermittently heard lashing the outside of the building. Inside, the day is going as usual, Patrick and Truman at each other's throats as always. Isaac has just helped set up the next experiment and is on his way out of the experiment room (as in, he'll have to count to 20 as soon as Time In hits)."

With that in mind, have the characters read out the mini-play.

When it gets to the 'lights flicker' part, if possible, A) have them flicker and B) Explain that at this point in time there is a huge flash of light and (only felt by those in the experiment room) wave of heat emanating from the radioactive material. Finish the mini-play, and tell them Time In.

## **1hour 50min Time In**

### **Quick Answers to the obvious player questions:**

Lights no longer function. The door is sealed and too solid to get through. The room is as you are in. I.e. if there's an air vent there, there's an air vent. No, they've never seen the radioactive material 'glow' before.

Initially, Kay, Ben & Peter all feel perfectly fine.

### **Longer Answers to what's going on:**

What has happened is that the violence of the storm outside has disrupted power to the building. When the first light flicker happened, Peter's hand slipped, allowing the two samples to come closer together than they had previously. This brought the samples close to, but did not start, a chain reaction of nuclear proportions (literally). Istvan's worry was that a chain reaction would happen due to the wrong mathematical equations- as you all have not been blown to smithereens, this hasn't happened. As for whose calculations this experiment was setup from: it came off of the same numbers as approved by both teams.

You may as a GM need to stir the pot. Make certain John keeps getting panicky- you can be the voice in his head if you so choose.

Halfway through Time In- Tell Private Gonzales that the flashlight has stopped working.

### **The Peter Story:**

During Time In, as a GM you need to feed Peter some cues. In the beginning he's fine. 15 minutes in, in varying order tell him that he's feeling deeply fatigued, and starting to have a bit of an upset stomach. 30 minutes in, tell him he's getting violently sick, his hair starts coming out in his hands. 1 Hour in, his vomit now has blood in it and his mind is starting to play tricks on him (memory loss, difficulty seeing etc). Stick to this timetable, regardless of whether he goes back in the other room or not as if you speed it up he may not have much left in him for the last hour.

If you or the player wishes it, you can move into coma. As this may impact the player's enjoyment, I recommend against it without the player's input. What I did find workable was to tell the player that from here on in he has periods of lucidity where everything is perfect for him. He's still really ill and not able to physically do much, but able to hold conversations. I left it up to the player to decide when he felt like what should be happening to him.

Kay and Ben have been hit by much, much less doses as Peter should have been placed in a position where his body shielded much of the 'radioactive material' from them. You can, by about 45minutes into Time In begin to give them headaches/fatigue but don't specifically tell them more than that (although if they as players feel their character would get further ill allow them to do so- psychosomatics are so much fun!).

**15min before finish:** Turn the lights on. Give it a bit and knock on the door and have the 'army' coming to get them out. The army will want to talk to Private Gonzales and get his opinion on things before opening the door. Play it by ear.

**5 min before finish:** Wrap Up. Because of the nature of this LARP, there will be questions. Start with the obvious ones:

Peter's fate is regrettable but sealed as soon as the experiment went wrong. He will die.

Ben will be perfectly fine once he gets a grip on his claustrophobia.

Kay will keep the baby, however it will have mental defects and she will be sterile for the rest of her life.

Nobody else, even if they went in the room, will be affected by the exposure.

Ask for a honest report from the Private Gonzales about what he is reporting to his superiors. Base explanations as to interrogations by the authorities/military prison for sabotage/breaches of security clearances/spying/treason/etc on his report.

No chain reaction was actually set in place, it just got very close to it when Peter's hands slipped. The changes in the documentation made by Stephen didn't actually affect the experiment at all.

And you're done!

