

# THE STELE AT THE HEART OF THE PLAINS

A mini roleplaying game by  
Côme Martin for 2 to 6 players.

Written in June 2019 for the  
Game Chef contest.

Inspired by *Stalker*, *Itras By*,  
*Milesvale* and *Radiant Terminus*.

Thanks to Guillaume Jentey,  
and to Eugénie, Florent, Jean,  
Olivier, Stéphane and Virg-  
ile. Drawings by Saki (Instruc-  
tions) and VT78 (Setting).

You are desperate wanderers, roam-  
ing through the irradiated plains of  
Russia, during a nuclear winter and  
endless siege wars between obscure  
groups. You are looking for the stele  
at the heart of these plains; it is said  
to wash the sins of who touches it.

Your guide suddenly disappeared,  
leaving only a pile of clothes behind.  
You are left to yourselves, lost in an  
hallucinated landscape.

1

To create a character, think about  
the following questions: what is  
their occupation? What have they sac-  
rificed for this trip? What do their  
loved ones think about it? How do  
they compromise in the current end-  
less conflict? Why are they ill-pre-  
pared for this journey? What sins  
would they want to wash away?

2

You don't have to write all these an-  
swers down, they are mostly useful to  
define your character. If you do write  
them, do it visibly and make sure all  
players have access to your notes.

The sin your character wants to  
absolve is secret for the other char-  
acters (not the other players); if they  
reveal it, they know the stele will  
not wash it away.

3

Example: Ignaty Larionov, country  
doctor. He sold his practice to make  
the trip, to the despair of his wife and  
two children. But he wants absolution  
for refusing to tend to a Lieutenant of  
the Circle, from fear of retaliation.

Example: Anzhelika Bychkov, writer.  
She has no talent and the small arti-  
cles she writes for the Triangle don't  
satisfy her anymore. She wants to atone  
for her many aborted relations.

4

Example: Klara Sorokin, war  
criminal. Her comrades from the  
Square still haven't understood why  
she gave everything up for this jour-  
ney, since she's not guilty of any  
crime; but it's precisely her coward-  
ice she wants to absolve.

5

Example: Vlasii Ukhtomsky, prop-  
aganda photograph for the Lozenge.  
He strangled the person who was sup-  
posed to go instead of him. But it's  
the price to pay to stop dreaming  
about the bodies he photographed in-  
stead of saving them.

6

The story begins with the char-  
acters lost in the plains. When each  
scene begins, players draw one setting  
card each and assemble the elements  
written on the cards to create the cur-  
rent landscape as the scene unfolds.  
They don't have to integrate all the  
elements they draw.

The aim of the story is to build and  
explore the relations between the  
characters and the complexity of their  
personality; the rest is secondary.

Players frame the scene in turn,  
going clockwise around the table. The  
character of the framing player is at  
the center of their scene. Whatever  
happens, each player has the last word  
on their own character and the elements  
they introduce. The potential extras  
are played by whoever wants to.

The elements don't have to be in-  
troduced right away, they can be men-  
tioned in the middle of a scene.

Scenes taking place in the charac-  
ters' past or their mental space are  
also possible.

7

When a player wants to skip to the  
next scene or another place in the  
plains, they put their hand on the  
setting cards pile and wait for the  
others' assent.

The plains are anything but nor-  
mal: two places can be a few meters  
or miles away, a few hours or weeks.  
Weather is uniformly morose but  
needn't remain coherent.

8

During play, each character will  
encounter a Presence which will  
haunt them until the end. They can't  
interact with this Presence which is  
always out of reach, but everybody  
sees it.

Each player can introduce their  
player when they see it fit, look-  
ing like something their character  
fears or regrets; they clearly say  
this is a Presence.

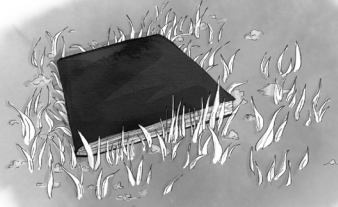
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You can use visual aids to remember  
which player hasn't introduced her  
Presence yet. If a player lacks ideas  
to introduce it, they can ask the oth-  
ers for advice.

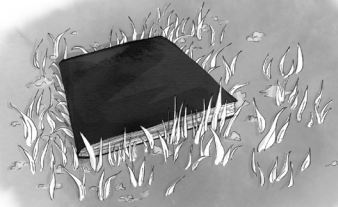
When all the players have described  
a Presence, the latter come closer and  
closer to the characters and the story  
ends with the scene fading to black.

10

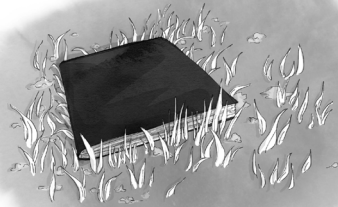
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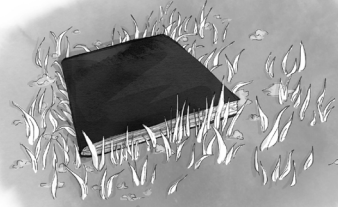
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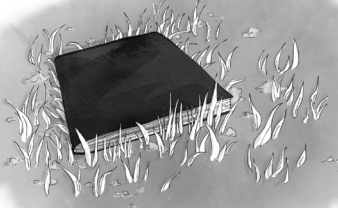
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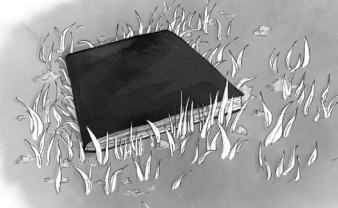
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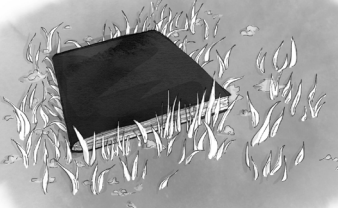
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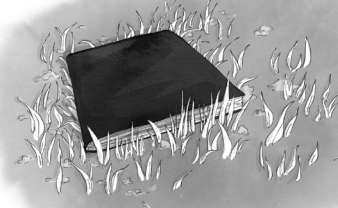
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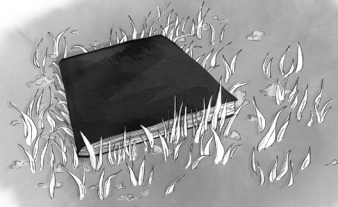
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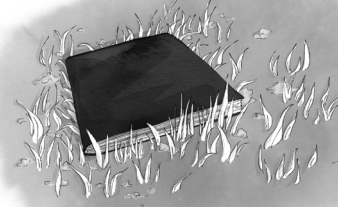
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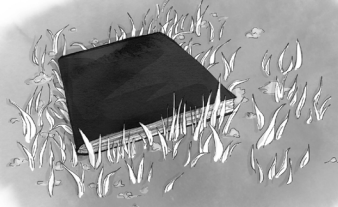
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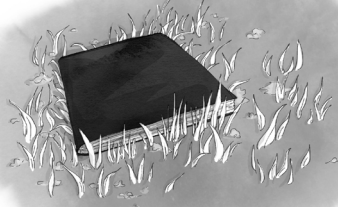
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A hillside mirror

A forest full of objects

A door in the middle of  
nowhere

Alleged magic powers

A ghostly version of  
someone already met

Something inverts

An island suspended  
above the ground

Someone lived there,  
before

Violent winds whipping  
the plains

A man in tears

An old woman with  
cut wings

A wandering saleswoman,  
without any goods

Worthless objects,  
recently stolen

A gramophone lost in the  
tall grass

A dusty cabin

Fleeting apparition of  
dead people

Yellowed photograph of  
other places  
in the plains

A rusty minefield

Here, gravity is lighter

A stele (not the one  
the characters are  
looking for) with a star  
engraved on it

A rusty wagon

A young man horribly  
transformed by radiations

Tired hunters

A unicorn with  
threadbare fur

Plants are  
covering glyphs

The characters' names  
are all listed,  
except one

Contradictory  
landmarks

When listening closely,  
you hear secrets

A lost child  
absorbing colors

A mute young woman

The frame of a plane

A car from another  
century stuck in bramble

A swarm of fireflies  
harass the characters

A moss concretion  
seems alive

A tall landmark elevating  
in the mist

Astray patrolling  
soldiers



A stretch of  
stagnant water

A lying oracle

A network of tunnels

Someone who is  
completely lost

Someone who claims they  
found the stele

Provisions full of worms

A child asleep  
next to a fire

A wandering traveler  
from the past of one of  
the characters

A lost love reemerges

Someone who doesn't  
wake up

Owls with the heads of  
octogenarians

The guide's specter,  
dissipating when you  
get close to it

Incarnation of dreams by  
the characters

A stele (not the one  
the characters are  
looking for) with a moon  
engraved on it

The lair of an old bear

Under their feet,  
tiny jewels

A large cavern where  
echoes die quickly

The ruins of a building

A woman whose hands  
continually bleed

A recently defiled tomb

A corrugated phone  
antenna

An angel's statue,  
broken in a small snow  
pile

Another guide,  
wearing a mask

The sin of a character,  
incarnated in  
the landscape

A traveler made of  
grass and mud

A loaded gun

There's no sound anymore

Old people looking  
exactly like the  
characters, except one

The place of a former  
execution

A collapsed factory

A woman devouring a dog

A lake full of dust

Someone who  
should be dead

Trees seeming flabby  
to the touch

Someone who recognizes  
the characters (but not  
vice versa)

Stairs to nowhere

