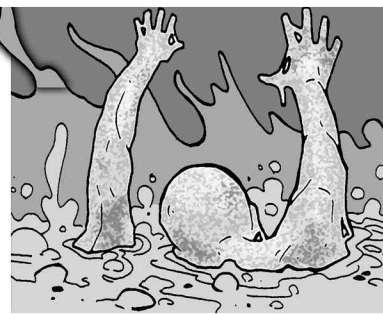


GURPS[®]

Fourth Edition

MAGIC[™]

DEATH SPELLS[™]



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Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all **GURPS** releases, including this book, are available on our website – see above.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition**. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air – instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse."

– J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

INTRODUCTION

Magical rituals designed to snuff out life appear often in myth and folklore – so often that “death spells” are among the defining abilities of sorcerers in most cultures. Tales of fantasy adventure uphold this tradition, arming wizards with all manner of killing curses. Murderous magic is an essential weapon in the arsenal of any self-respecting sword-and-sorcery villain.

That last point identifies one of the problems with such magic, however: In adventure fiction, death spells are traditionally the province of *villains*, and only rarely wielded by heroes. Enabling good guys to wipe out evildoers with a gesture removes much of the struggle and risk that make for an engaging story. Moreover, death magic is bereft of the moral benefit of the doubt that other combat spells offer. Heroic casters can claim that, say, fireballs were meant to demoralize or incapacitate (probable outcomes even when playing for keeps) . . . but because death spells *don't work unless they kill*, using them implies homicidal intent better-suited to bad guys.

Such dramatic considerations don't always matter to gamers, a somewhat pragmatic lot whose alter-egos often inhabit black-and-white worlds where evil needs killing. For them, a deadly magical arms race between heroes and villains suggests a different problem: an NPC could end the career of a well-loved PC in an abrupt puff of sorcery. Now *that* is hard to accept! The players of wizards might consider turnabout fair play (they have access to specialized defenses, after all), but others may not agree.

GURPS Magic avoids death spells for all of these reasons. Yet there's no denying that they have a place in tales of fantasy and magic – particularly in hack 'n' slash games where life is cheap, such as *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*. To forbid such curses is to omit a fixture of a popular genre.

The solution is to make death spells *balanced*. Energy costs and prerequisites ought to be steeper than usual. Victims must receive a fair chance (perhaps *several* chances) to resist, dodge, be cured, or tough it out – and some categories of subjects may be entirely immune. High-powered examples should pose risks to the caster. *GURPS Magic: Death Spells* offers options that satisfy these conditions.

The other major goal here is to provide *variety*. The practical wizard might invest in a single death spell, but fantasy offers countless grisly possibilities – each unique in some way – and magic-wielders pursue many paths. Even the most pragmatic hack 'n' slash spell-slinger will want backup plans for slaughtering foes who have special immunities. And fantasy isn't the only genre with sorcery! The needs of *GURPS Horror* differ from those of *GURPS Fantasy*, and alternate histories featuring folkloric magic are another thing again.

So here are 48 ways to die . . .

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

This supplement requires the *GURPS Basic Set* to use. Except when ignoring spell prerequisites (as with clerical

magic), *GURPS Magic* is necessary, too. Nothing else is essential, but the GM seeking a way to control access to death magic that's more flavor than fiat will find *GURPS Thaumatology: Magical Styles* valuable.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

This is the first edition of *GURPS Magic: Death Spells*. The only material published in earlier works consists of three spells adapted from *GURPS Magical Styles: Dungeon Magic* (Death, Dissipate, and Soul Prison) and two from *GURPS Thaumatology: Magical Styles* (Annihilation and Rift to Hell). All have been altered to make them more generic.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean “Dr. Kromm” Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985, ended up the *GURPS* Line Editor in 1995, and has engineered rules for almost every *GURPS* product since. He developed, edited, or wrote dozens of *GURPS Third Edition* projects between 1995 and 2002. In 2004, he produced the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition* with David Pulver. Since then, he has created *GURPS Powers* (with Phil Masters), *GURPS Martial Arts* (with Peter Dell’Orto), *GURPS Zombies*, and the *GURPS Action*, *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, and *GURPS Power-Ups* series . . . among many other things. Sean has been a gamer since 1979. His non-gaming interests include cinema, mixology, and Argentine tango. He and his wife, Bonnie, live in Montréal with their cat, Zephyra.

Death-affected mana. Regions with this aspect benefit all death spells, regardless of college – even those in the Healing college.

Life-affected mana. Zones with this aspect hinder all death spells – even those in the Healing college.

Stayin' Alive

GURPS Magic describes almost no death spells because they're so difficult to balance. In a campaign that uses **GURPS Magic: Death Spells**, it's wise to offer defenses.

Resistant to Death Curses

For the purpose of Resistant (pp. B80-81), Death Curses is an "Occasional" category comprising all *supernatural* effects intended to cause death. This includes death spells, direct-damage Necromantic magic (Burning Death, Rotting Death, etc.), and elixirs of Death (**Magic**, p. 215), plus nonmagical equivalents such as Afflictions enhanced with Coma or Heart Attack, when they're chi, divine, psionic, or spirit abilities, or something similar. The resistance bonus adds to whatever roll the possessor must make – usually against HT or Will. This trait represents a strong soul or a superhuman mastery of death, and doesn't affect superscience death rays, ordinary disease or poison, or HT rolls to avoid death from HP loss.

The GM decides what levels to allow. Immunity to Death Curses [10] could be reserved for whatever categories of beings can buy Unkillable, but anyone might have Resistant to Death Curses (+3) [3] or Resistant to Death Curses (+8) [5]. Add Cosmic, +50% to resist the will of death *gods*.

Resistant to Death Spells

Death Spells is a "Rare" subset of Death Curses, implying Resistant to Death Spells (+3) [1], Resistant to Death Spells (+8) [2], and Immunity to Death Spells [5]. Similar restrictions on purchase make sense.

Limited Magic Resistance

"Limited, Only against death magic" is a -75% limitation on Magic Resistance (p. B67). This gives a penalty to enemy spells as well as a bonus to resist. It and Resistant to Death Spells are roughly comparable for the points, but it makes the most sense for a campaign to use one or the other.

Hard to Kill

Hard to Kill (pp. B58-59) *doesn't* generally aid resistance rolls against death spells themselves – though if a death spell leaves the victim rolling against HT to avoid dying (as with mortal wounds or coma), it provides its usual bonus on those rolls. *Exception:* It *does* benefit resistance against spells that cause heart attack or equivalent effects (e.g., respiratory arrest) that offer no HT roll once they occur.

Special Effects

The lethal aspects of death magic reuse a relatively small set of rules. Differentiating between curses and keeping the game interesting involves fine-tuning game-mechanical details,

defining appropriate secondary outcomes, and using evocative imagery. For all of this, there's no better inspiration than the spell's college! Some ideas:

Air: Asphyxia; inflating someone until they explode; turning the victim to air and blowing them away.

Animal: Partial shapeshifting of an organ to a useless form; transforming the subject into small, mindless creatures that scatter.

Body Control: Any mortal condition, inflicted directly!

Communication and Empathy: Possession that fatally separates mind and body; telepathic attacks that destroy the brain.

Earth: Partial petrification of vital organs; total petrification followed by turning the stone to air, dust, or mud that blows or trickles away.

Enchantment: Malefices that kill the subject when destroyed.

Fire: Wholesale save-or-die incineration!

Food: Poison that's fatal if not resisted; Prepare Game perversions that messily turn the victim inside-out.

Gate: Super-accelerated aging; transportation to a plane inimical to life.

Healing: Cures that are "better than the alternative" for the injured or sick, but potentially deadly for a well person (like many real-life medical treatments).

Illusion and Creation: Objects created inside vital organs; phantoms scary enough to cause heart attack.

Knowledge: Knowledge so terrifying it causes heart attack – or of a supernatural truth that kills!

Light and Darkness: Body of shadow snuffed out by a bright flash, or body of light doused in shadow.

Making and Breaking: Shatter, Explode, or Disintegrate variants that can destroy living matter.

Meta-Spells: Curses that cause immediately fatal coincidences; dispelling the cosmic magic of life itself.

Mind Control: Deprivation of the will to live; mindlessness too severe to support life; yet more heart attack-inducing fear.

Movement: Crushing telekinetic forces; teleporting away vital parts.

Necromantic: Destroying souls, draining life force, ripping out organs . . . it all suits the college of death!

Plant: Deadly poisonous plants, pollen, or slime; vital organs turned to wood.

Protection and Warning: Force walls that form inside of or cut through people.

Sound: Concussive effects within the body; words no mortal was meant to hear.

Technological: Energy spells that affect the energy within the body; radiation spells that conjure death rays.

Water: Blood to acid; dehydrating someone and blowing away the dust; drowning; transforming the victim to water that trickles away.

Weather: Heart-attack inducing lightning jolt; turning someone to lightning and grounding them out.

The chosen demise can help determine how the spell kills (*Faces of Death*, pp. 4-5); inspire *Creepy Supernatural Drawbacks* (p. 8); imply other details that influence *Energy Cost* (pp. 7-8); and suggest side effects (on survivors or bystanders) and general color (notably, what state the victim ends up in: corpse, goo, dust, vanished . . .).

PLANT SPELLS

The Plant college already offers a spell that can slay sentient, animate beings: Wither Plant. This is a death spell – ask a walking tree! Below are spells for slaughtering non-vegetable foes.

Murder Blossom (VH)

Regular

Conjures a beautiful flower to hand that belches forth a jet of deadly pollen a second later. There's no way to delay this. To exploit it, the caster's maneuver on the turn after casting the spell must be Attack, All-Out Attack, or Move and Attack. Any other choice dissipates the pollen harmlessly, wasting the spell.

The caster may direct the blast at a one-yard-wide circle – one hex, on a combat map – within four yards. Treat this as *Attacking an Area* (p. B414). Roll against Innate Attack (Beam)+4 to hit, checking for scatter on a miss. (*Exception:* Hitting the wizard's own hex requires no roll, and happens automatically if the caster is stunned, unconscious, or otherwise incapacitated when the blossom erupts.) The only defense allowed is diving for cover (p. B377), and shield DB provides no benefit.

Anyone who fails to escape the area is affected – this is a rare death spell that can kill multiple people. Roll the spell's effect dice (from 1d to 4d) once per victim. Any result equal to or greater than that person's HT indicates a fatal allergic reaction. Treat this as a mortal wound (p. B423): The target instantly falls unconscious and must roll vs. HT every 30 minutes, with *any* failure meaning death. At TL6+, trauma maintenance can help.

Natural recovery occurs on a critical success on the HT roll. Otherwise, the only cure is suitable TL6+ medication or a Neutralize Poison spell, at -5 unless Identify Plant is cast first to determine *what* pollen caused the reaction. Victims who recover are at -2 to DX for 3d seconds afterward, thanks to itching, but suffer no lasting harm.

The deadly pollen is a contact agent that affects any living being without the Sealed advantage (natural or from equipment) and/or Immunity to Metabolic Hazards. Magic Resistance provides no benefit – no magic is cast *on the victim*.

Duration: 1 second.

Cost: 7, plus 1 per die of effect, to a maximum of four dice. Cannot be maintained.

Time to cast: 3 seconds.

Prerequisites: Magery 3, Create Plant, and Pollen Cloud.

Swamp Rot (VH)

Regular; Resisted by HT

Transforms any living subject and up to 6 lbs. of clothing to organic gunk – similar to the Body of Slime spell, but without stabilizing the results. The only defense is to resist (or ward) the spell. The subject's remaining possessions are left floating in a puddle of scum, which may ruin some gear.

“You Can't Kill Me; I'm Already Dead!”

Barring accidents and creepy supernatural drawbacks (p. 8), the subject of a death spell is normally someone besides the caster. Still, a wizard who wants to commit suicide *can* target himself, waiving any resistance roll. A fanatic might do this if losing a battle or facing capture – and if the spell involved is something like Black Sphere (p. 20), it can prevent powerful artifacts from being captured. Such twists are delightfully creepy, especially when they involve magic-workers who are likely to return as undead, a destiny all too common among masters of death magic!

Mind Control magic (e.g., Charm) *can* coerce an enemy magic-user to commit suicide this way, though that's inefficient. If you control your opponent's mind, why not compel him to cast death spells on your *other* adversaries? Death magic is also fussy compared to ordering someone to drink poison, fall on a sword, or similar. Still, it has a certain poetry to it and is hardly the worst abuse of mental control, so there's no reason to forbid it.

In some settings, there may be a simple spell specially for committing suicide – the magical equivalent of a cyanide capsule. This is technically a death spell, though it can kill only the caster, and normally part of the Necromantic college. Here's one possible example.

Suicide

Special

Instantly kills the *caster*. The wizard declares an expenditure of as many FP and HP as desired – usually enough to reach -5xHP, at least. Success means these losses occur instantly and death follows without a HT or resistance roll, as long as the caster is at -HP or worse; reaching -10xHP prevents Resurrection. Failure costs the standard 1 FP (1 HP, if spending only HP) but allows repeated attempts. This spell isn't subject to the penalties in *Burning HP* (p. B237) and *Shock* (p. B419), making it a reliable way for even a sorely wounded magic-user to check out.

The theological ramifications of this spell depend on the setting. It might be considered sinful black magic; neither better nor worse than mundane suicide; or, when granted to a cleric, a very pure death.

Duration: Instantaneous. Subject can be resurrected only if above -10xHP.

Cost: Unlimited, but usually enough to ensure death.

Prerequisite: Magery 1.

This usually means the victim dies messily. However, if *all* the goo can be collected within a minute (doubtful if the subject was standing on anything but hard, dry ground like stone or finished wood), Remove Curse can reverse the effects. This must be cast before the stuff dies, which won't take long in any environment that isn't rich in rotting organic matter. The GM may require daily Biology or Naturalist rolls from the slime's caretaker.

Duration: The spell lasts an instant, but the effects are permanent unless reversed via Remove Curse.

Cost: 11. Must affect the entire subject, not just part of it!

Time to cast: 5 seconds.

Prerequisites: Magery 3 and Body of Slime.

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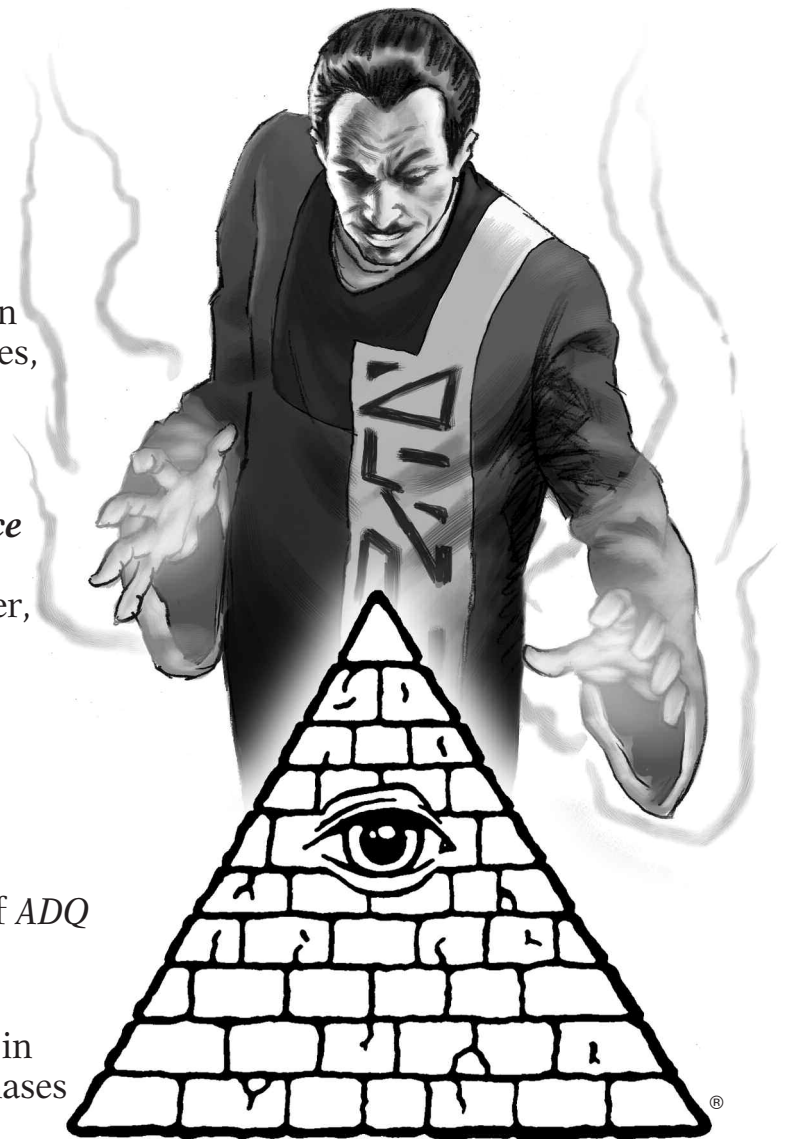
*Sealed with a curse as sharp
as a knife. Doomed is your soul
and damned is your life.*

*– Lord John Whorfin,
in The Adventures of
Buckaroo Banzai Across
the Eighth Dimension*

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