Columbia, Maryland: City of Secrets
Part One: Overview

Columbia, Maryland. It is arguably the second-largest city in the state, and it's definitely one of the most affluent areas in the country. Virtually everything about it, down the lake that centerpieces its geography, was constructed in the mid-1960s: the area is as artificial as Brasilia or Washington, DC. Columbia was carefully designed to lack a unified city government, to subtly discourage the presence of individual churches, and to take full advantage of its proximity to Baltimore, Washington DC, and I-95. And pretty much nobody living there knows anybody else's business at any given moment.

In short: if there *were* such things as secret government conspiracies, occult urban cults, and/or organized Supernatural Weird Stuff going on in our world, Columbia would be a perfect place for them to set up shop. In game worlds where such things do in fact happen, it would be difficult to explain why they don't have a presence in the area. It's far too good a place for hiding in plain sight.

This particular project will be broken up into three categories: Government Conspiracies (espionage /

paranoia) , Urban Cults (general horror), and Supernatural Weird Stuff (generally self-explanatory). Government Conspiracies will be more *Jason Bourne* than *X-Files*; Urban Cults is for investigatory (and apocalyptic) campaigns; and Supernatural Weird Stuff will focus on slice of life and general peculiarities. Obviously, one category can bleed into the other: if people want to run Columbia as the United Nations Model Cultist Villages there's nothing stopping them. Or, for that matter: having all three campaign lens running at once would make for a memorable, if ultimately short, visit to the area.

One thing that is common to whatever version of Columbia gets run is this: it's surprisingly isolated, at least in terms oversight. The area is not incorporated, and much of the effective civic administration is overseen by various companies and corporations. This means that, once you get below the county government level, things get kind of murky in both politics and law enforcement. Likewise, the relative dearth of individual churches limits that kind of social networking (and in horror games, can become a downright dangerous quirk of the landscape in worlds where the availability of sanctified ground is literally a matter of life and death). And, as it happens: there's no convenient military base in Columbia, Maryland. All of which means that it's relatively easy to justify situations

where an adventuring party can't simply call in the authorities, because there's some doubt about just who the relevant authorities are. Or whether they haven't already been coopted. Or even if they exist in the first place.

Another thing to remember about the various versions of Columbia is that whatever is lurking in the city is predisposed to be subtle and discreet. The city's prime location between Baltimore and Washington means that its lack of incorporation and traditional community centers will only go so far in keeping things quiet. Blow up a building or dig up a mass grave, and people **will** notice. And many of those people work in either national media, or the federal government.

Lastly: GMs running Columbia will have to decide whether or not the original developers were involved with whichever conspiracy or secret organizations are using Columbia now. It's simpler to have them be knowingly up to their eyeballs, supernaturally speaking; but a scenario where the development companies unknowingly cast some sort of megapolisomantic Great Magic has a certain appeal as well. If for no other reason than it can allow for a rather more literal deus ex machina if a particular adventuring party turns out to really, really need it…