

DARK SECRET

A role-playing game about a terrible secret, and the lives that it changed.

3
FORGED
15116

Dark Secret

Dark Secret is about one person's secret past resurfacing and how it affects their life and the lives of the people close to them. The game requires a minimum of three players: one GM (who controls all of the NPCs, as well as the Antagonist at the start of the game), one player that possesses a secret identity (known as the Protagonist at the start of the game) and at least one Associate. With more players, all players who are not the GM or the Protagonist take on the roles of Associates at the start of the game. Associates are characters that are connected with the Protagonist somehow.

The game is intended to be played out in one to three sessions, with the story being divided into three acts: 1. Before the Reveal; 2. After the Reveal; and 3. The Climax. The Reveal is when the Protagonist's Secret Identity comes to the forefront and the narrative explodes. Before the Reveal builds up toward the Reveal (it is also the phase where the players get used to their Traits) and After the Reveal should move to resolve what happens due to the revelation of the Secret Identity, culminating eventually in The Climax. Each act is divided up into a series of scenes. Special mechanics govern each act in different ways.

Getting Started

The Protagonist

Choose one player to take on the Protagonist role. The game will center on them for the entire story. She is the star of the show, whether she is a hero, an anti-hero, or even a villain.

The Protagonist should declare what is publicly known about her character. What is her profession, where does she live, what is her reputation? It can be as glorious or mundane as you like. The background you choose now will greatly influence the setting of the story though, so at least make sure you have an interesting concept.

The Protagonist player should now choose her Secret Identity which describes who she used to be and what she is capable of. It should remain absolutely secret to the Associate players until the Reveal. A Secret Identity can be chosen from the sample list below or made from scratch based on the samples. The GM knows what the Secret Identity is and should drive the story toward conflict based on the Secret Identity.

Based on the choice of Secret Identity, the Protagonist chooses two Traits (which are not labeled *Secret*) that they may benefit from before the Reveal. After the Reveal, however, the Protagonist can choose two more Secret Traits. Some of the Secret Traits are Tagged – they give a new Trait to Associates who possess the Tag Trait, but not until After the Reveal, of course. Trait effects are intentionally vague and open to allow wiggle room. The Protagonist may also make up new Traits based on the samples.

The Associates

All other player characters are known as Associates. Their lives and skills are directly influenced both by the Identity the Protagonist chooses and the Archetype they choose for themselves. Each Protagonist Identity and Associate Archetype produces their own unique combination of Traits for the Associates.

Each Associate must first choose an Archetype for their character. It is advisable that the Archetype is chosen from the sample list. The available Archetype options are: spouse/lover, child, friend, colleague/classmate, rival, investigator, teacher and guardian.

Sample Secret Identity: Alien

Alien Traits

Camouflage

The Protagonist conceals themselves by blending into the surroundings. NPCs in pursuit of the Protagonist fail to discover the Protagonist, but an Associate is targeted as a possible lead.

Extreme Agility

The Protagonist uses their inhuman quickness to escape a situation. Any attempt to catch the Protagonist is foiled, but an acquaintance of an Associate witnesses the event unwittingly.

Extreme Strength

Whatever stops the Protagonist from their escape is simply destroyed with unexpected force. The Protagonist may push through any obstacle with sheer power, but the pursuers learn to expect it. This can only resolve a situation once.

Biological Senses

Due to their alien biology, the Protagonist secretly possesses senses that allow detection of living organisms. Using this, the Protagonist becomes aware of where pursuers are. They also realize a quick escape path – but there is at least one person in that path, whose identity the Protagonist cannot ascertain.

Psychic Attack (Secret)

The Protagonist may render someone completely comatose with psychic force. This removes an NPC from the story – but an Associate who witnesses this event or discovers it becomes hostile to the Protagonist, though the Associate's player decides by how much.

Flight (Secret)

Either with alien technology or psychic power, the Protagonist can bypass most physical obstacles with levitation. However this is extremely obvious – no matter the precautions, many people witness this and the Protagonist's alien nature becomes public knowledge.

Once an Archetype is chosen, each Associate should choose four Traits from their Archetype's list. Associate traits are used in the same way as the Secret Identity traits, with the only difference being that Associates start with a full set of four traits, instead of waiting until After the Reveal to achieve full power as the Protagonist must.

It should be noted that while the Protagonist's background dictates a great deal about the game, they are no more important than Associate characters. While the Protagonist will start out early with potentially more useful Traits, the Associates are allowed to have more flexibility and receive a wider variety of Traits to explore.

Finishing Touches

Before the game begins in earnest, decide the relationships between the characters or at least the relationship between the Protagonist and each of the Associates. The GM will use these plot hooks to drive the story toward conflict, so take time to set an interesting backdrop before the game begins.

Cards: Last but not least, each player — the GM included — must draw 5 cards from a deck of regular playing cards. Dark Secret uses cards, not dice, to semi-randomly determine action resolution, and these cards you draw at the start of the game become your starting hand.

Taking Action

Cards and Traits

In this game, we are not overly worried about randomly determining the results of every single little action. Rather, players should role-play each scene freeform until it culminates in a defining moment, and then either use Traits or play a card to determine how the scene ends. When players attempt risky or difficult actions mid-scene—before the scene's defining moment—the GM will decide whether the action succeeded or failed. The GM is urged to use common sense as a guideline, and to lean in favor of the Protagonist if the players role-played the situation with flair.

Once a scene has reached its climax, the players must determine how it ends. All scene participants must either use a trait or play a card from their hand. The GM plays a single card to represent all NPC actions.

When you use a Trait, it always works exactly as written in the Trait's description. Traits give an "auto win" effect, coupled with a problematic drawback. When attempting something under the purview of a Trait, it can not succeed unless you use the Trait. As a special bonus, whenever you use a Trait, you have the option of discarding one of the cards from your hand and draw a new one to replace it.

When you want to do something that is not covered by one of your Traits, you will play one card from your hand. Regular playing cards are used, with jokers taken out. Aces count as 1's, and high cards are stronger than low cards. Face cards all count as 0. Furthermore, the different card suits are better at doing different things:

- **Hearts:** if you play a heart in a social scene where you are appealing to someone's emotions or trying to be brave, add +5 to your card's value.
- **Diamonds:** if you play a diamond in a mental scene where you are trying to outsmart somebody, add +5 to your card's value.

Biological Weaponry (Secret)

The Protagonist uses their alien biology to cause uncontrollable and extreme harm. By spilling bodily fluids, the Protagonist releases a devastating pathogen that spreads beyond control. The Associates can choose to distance themselves from the Protagonist physically *and* emotionally; or to remain close to the Protagonist and eventually die before the Protagonist's eyes.

Inheritance: Artifact (Secret, Associate Tag)

Something in previous possession of the Protagonist lands in the hands of an Associate. If multiple Associates receive this alien inheritance, this can affect the story only once. Using this extraterrestrial technology resolves any problem that affects only the Associates and not the Protagonist – but it is spent after single use and the Associate who used it is also considered alien by the pursuers.

Special Power: Telekinesis (Secret, Associate Tag)

Constant exposure to the Protagonist's alien psyche bled a measure of telekinetic power to their Associates. Using this, the Associate can cause any *physical* phenomenon that resolves a situation, but as long as doing so creates an alternative problem suggested by the Associate's player.

Insight: Xenobiology (Secret, Associate Tag)

Either by circumstance or by subtle influence, the Associate is a hobby xenobiologist. They can heal the Protagonist whenever they receive an injury. However, once this is enforced, they will eventually die before the Protagonist's eyes as per Biological Weaponry.

Passion: The Beyond (Secret, Associate Tag)

The Associate realizes that all the strangeness that stalked their life was because their connection with the Protagonist. Everything clicks and the Associate now learns to exploit this. Should the Protagonist end up being killed or captured for good, an Associate with this Passion has the choice to send a distress signal to the Protagonist's homeworld.

Following are some partially finished secret identities for you to flesh out in later games.

Spy

Traits before the reveal: disguise, stealth, spy gadgets, money, languages, dance, driving.

- **Clubs:** if you play a club in a physical scene where you are trying to overpower somebody—but not kill them—or where displays of physical prowess are important, add +5 to your card's value.
- **Spades:** if you play a spade in a combat scene where you are trying to harm or kill your opponent, add +5 to your card's value.

If you play a face card of the suit corresponding to your action, it counts as 5 (0+5), and you may optionally play another card of any suit and add it to your total. Multiple face cards may be played in a row, and stack up to the final total.

When the cards are played, they are compared and the highest card wins. Ties result in both actions succeeding. If the action was not one that involved character vs character conflict, or requires some other factor to determine whether the actions passed or failed, the GM will compare the cards against one of the following two difficulty numbers. All characters who meet or beat the action's difficulty will succeed:

Easier actions: 8 or higher

Harder actions: 13 or higher

Drawing Cards

Whenever a card is played from your hand, a new card is drawn to replace it. If you play 2 cards, draw 2 replacements. All players should have 5 cards in their hands at all times before the Reveal.

During Act II: After the Reveal, whenever an Antagonist gets to draw a card, they draw one bonus card, breaking the 5 card limit. In Act III: The Climax, the bonus card benefit is transferred to the Protagonists.

Combat

Combat can happen in any scene, but is not always lethal. Unless traits are brought into play, combat is resolved with a single card played by all participants, as with any normal scene. A combatant that fails by 3 or more may face death if lethal force was used. Otherwise, a wound is taken by all losers and in the case of ties.

The Protagonist and Antagonist are granted “story protection” during key segments of the game. The Protagonist has story protection Before the Reveal, and the Antagonist has story protection After the Reveal until the The Climax begins. Story protection causes them to take a wound instead of dying if they fail any combat scene. Associates may die at any time, however.

If the only Antagonist dies, the GM should introduce a new one later. If the only Protagonist dies, the Associate with the most red cards fills the role, and the player of the deceased character starts a new Associate character. If an Associate dies, that player should take on a new Associate PC, who will enter the story next scene.

After the reveal: marksmanship, martial arts, spy vehicles, connections, passport.

Gives: inheritance – one spy gadget of your devising (within reason), special power - body guard from the spy agency, insight - detect lies, passion - espionage

Mutant

Traits before the reveal: invisibility, telepathy, fast healing, super speed, super strength.

After the reveal: flight, eye beams, ice breath, teleportation, weather control, magnetism.

Gives: inheritance – unstable, insight – mutant killing, special power – radiation control (such as producing light, heat, the power to cause cancer), insight - genetics, passion - mutant rights.

Cult leader

Traits before the reveal: persuasion, sexiness, knowledge of religion, history, ancient artifacts, politics.

After the reveal: hypnosis, fear, deadly words, instill blind faith.

Gives: inheritance – robes of power, special power – hypnosis, insight – power of religion, passion - conversion.

Occultist

Traits before the reveal: familiar, sleep, project noise, minor illusions.

After the reveal: elemental magic, summon creature, invisibility, killing sound.

Gives: inheritance - magic, special power - null magic field, insight - the beyond; passion – power or balance.

Robot

Traits before the reveal: mental calculator, feel no pain, feel no fear, know it all, super strong.

After the reveal: nearly unkillable, laser eyes, malleable body, computer interface.

Gives: inheritance - cyborg, special power - nanobots, insight - computer hacking, passion - robotics.

Werewolf

Traits before the reveal: heightened senses, intimidating presence, night strength, pheromones.

After the reveal: change at will, damage reduction, hunter's lust,

Gives: Inheritance – lycanthropy; special power – communicate with canines; insight - knowledge of the paranormal; passion – finding the cure.

Wounds

The player of the wounded character must draw a single card from the deck and place it in front of her on the table. This card represents her character's wound, until healed, with the severity of the wound depending on how *low* the card's value is. When the character tries to play an action card of the same *color* as one of her wound cards, she can never do better than the rank of her wound. The wound's rank signifies the maximum effort the character can exert, and she may not even play higher ranked cards. If the wound card is a face card, the character will be disabled from playing similarly colored cards at all until healed.

Healing wounds depends on the fiction. Most wounds do not heal within the course of the story without use of Traits. A wound ranked 6 or higher might heal in a few scenes if enough time has passed in the fiction. Face card wounds may partially heal in a couple scenes: draw a new card from the deck, which replaces the face card if it's of the same color.

Creating New Secret Identities and Traits

While a list of sample Secret Identities is provided below, it is suggested for the Protagonist to create their own Secret Identity to get the most out of Dark Secret. This is not a difficult process.

First, determine the nature of the Secret Identity. It should be something exotic, unusual or even downright weird. It should make things interesting. When the Reveal happens and everyone around the table realizes who the Protagonist used to be, it should recast everything that has happened so far in a radically different light.

Once that is determined, think of what Traits that the Secret Identity might possess. A Trait is like a character ability, but the catch is that benefiting from a Trait should never stop the story flow. A Trait kicking in should either create a new problem that is different to the problem it is solving and/or abate your problems for now at the cost of causing more problems later.

Because you are making a Secret Identity for a unique game, there is no need to create more than four Traits. However, remember that After the Reveal Traits are chosen at the moment of the Reveal. Making a long list of Secret Traits to choose from may allow you to be more flexible. Also, try to include one of each of the four special tag traits, so that Associates are more dynamically influenced by the Protagonist's identity. The four tags are:

- **Inheritance:** Something in previous possession of the Protagonist lands in the hands of an Associate.
- **Special Power:** The Associate gains a special power from the Protagonist.
- **Insight:** The Associate knows something special and mysterious about the Protagonist. The knowledge may be used for benefit somehow.
- **Passion:** The Associate's strong passionate feelings toward the Protagonist may benefit her by allowing her to rise up and beyond the capabilities of ordinary people.

Associate Archetypes

Spouse / Lover

Vow

The Associate possesses a special, almost spiritual link with the Protagonist. They are instinctively aware when the Protagonist is in a trouble they cannot deal with on their own. Should such a situation occur, the Associate's attempt to contact the Protagonist succeeds against all odds. A line of communication must happen, somehow.

Soothing Words

The Associate has been so close with the Protagonist for so long that they know exactly the words that can calm them down. This Trait allows the Protagonist to overcome a mental or emotional problem. However, this prohibits the Protagonist from pursuing to resolve the source of that issue until it strikes back.

Insightfulness

The Associate possesses an uncommon insight into the problems harrowing the Protagonist. The player suggests a plan for the Protagonist and the GM must accept it as the solution to one of the Protagonist's problems. On the other hand, the Protagonist must accept it also.

Luck

The Associate is plain lucky. With this Trait in force, the Associate avoids threats by sheer chance. But that luck has to come from somewhere – unless the Associate player suggests a new threat of similar magnitude for their own character, the GM is able to inflict such a threat on the Protagonist that cannot be avoided by any Trait.

Special Power (Tag)

The Associate has gained an uncannily strange edge in a particular skill. Ask the Protagonist what it is.

Insight (Tag)

The Associate has gained a deep insight about something you shouldn't know about. Ask the Protagonist what it is.

Once you've gotten this far, take no further steps. Start the game feeling unfinished. Allow the GM and the Associates to complete your Protagonist for you.

The same rules apply to designing Associate traits, except that Associates always only get four normal traits and two tags.

The Story

Act I: Before the Reveal

In the first act, the Protagonist's Secret Identity is unknown to all Associates. The GM should first set a scene or two to allow the players to get used to their PCs and their traits. Don't waste too much time though! You will build the story up, scene by scene, challenging the Protagonist's Secret Identity to come out into the spotlight. Push harder and harder every scene; eventually they'll be forced to reveal the truth! This act can be as long or as short as you want or need it to be, but it should generally be played out within 4 to 8 scenes.

The Reveal

Act I ends the moment the Protagonist's Secret Identity is uncovered to the Associates, literally stopping the scene midway without any cards or traits being played (unless appropriate). If the Protagonist's Secret Identity is revealed to the Associates but not the Antagonist and other important NPCs, it is inevitable that they will find out very soon.

The First Twist

There also is a chance that the story might take a further Twist during The Reveal. At the end of the Reveal scene, all players — the GM included — have the option of showing their hands to try and take on a Protagonist or Antagonist role. The player with the most black face cards becomes an Antagonist, and the player with the most red face cards becomes a Protagonist. It is not necessary for the original Protagonist and Antagonist to lose their roles for another to come in. Secret Identity and Associate traits remain with the character, and the character with the Secret Identity gains their two new Traits as normal After the Reveal. Furthermore, it will always be the Secret Identity that drives the story toward its final conclusion. If there is a Twist — there isn't always — there should also be a short scene for each Twist that comes into play, to show how the Twist unfolds, before moving on to Act II.

Child

Innocence

The Associate really does not know – or does not know at least that. Should someone try to get a lead on the Protagonist via the Associate with this Trait, they eventually give up. However, the Associate must provide an alternative lead that may or may not lead to something useful at the player's choice.

Youthful Vigor

The Associate is not particularly strong or quick, but they do possess surprising vigor. No attempt to physically withhold the Associate succeeds – either they slip out of a hold or they dash through obstacles too small for adult pursuers. During escape, however, the Associate remembers an object or information that could have helped the Protagonist, which they retroactively forgot to get.

The Internet

The Associate is adept with the Internet. They can discover any non-secret information somewhere. However, their queries rouse the attention of conspiracy theorists who might be substantially inconvenient.

Stealth

The Associate either is too small to be easily detected or too young to cause suspicion. You can sneak into places where others may not. Doing so they can retrieve three pieces of information. However, one of them is outdated or simply wrong at the GM's secret decision.

Hope

The Associate's willpower does not give in easily, because everything has happened their way so far. Should you get stuck in a helpless situation, the player can demand another to help them. The Associate player suggests what the cost of helping them is – if the target player accepts it, their character saves the Associate. If they don't, you can never benefit from this Trait again.

Inheritance (Tag)

The Associate has an odd possession, given by the Protagonist. Ask her what it is.

Passion (Tag)

The Associate has gained a dangerous obsession, inspired by the Protagonist. Ask her what it is.

Act II: After The Reveal

This act details events that quickly build up to a crisis once the Protagonist's Secret Identity is uncovered. Each scene in this act will get progressively more and more dangerous, until the star of the show is forced into a final confrontation. This act is usually fairly short, around 3 to 6 scenes on average. The GM should drive it hard and fast toward a climax.

Two Special Traits

The character with the Secret Identity gains two new special traits from her list at the beginning of Act II. Tag traits grant the Associates special benefits, and may also apply to previous Associates that twisted into a Protagonist or Antagonist.

Act III: The Climax

The big showdown, the boss fight, the dramatic end-scene. The Climax begins when all players and the GM agree that the story has come to a head, again interrupting mid-scene just as The Reveal did. Often this happens when the Antagonist and the Protagonists enter into lethal combat, but there could be other triggers. Play then erupts into a fast-paced action scene until either the Protagonist or Antagonist come out as the clear winner.

The Second Twist

There is another chance of a Twist happening at the very beginning of the Climax scene. All players that did not already change during the first Twist have the option of now showing their hands to compare red and black face cards. The same mechanics as the first twist apply.

The Climactic Action Scene

The Climax does not play out freeform as other scenes do. Instead, it takes the form of a series of short round by round blows, with an action card or a Trait being used at the end of every round. Normal card mechanics apply, but Traits may now be effectively blocked with a hard action (difficulty 13). New cards are drawn at the end of every round.

Following are some partially finished archetypes for you to flesh out in later games.

Colleague / Classmate / Friend

Starting traits: gather information, likable, athletics, computer use.

Tags: special power, passion

Investigator

Starting traits: gun use, sleuthing, connections, vigilance.

Tags: passion, insight.

Rival

Starting traits: investigation, stealth, camera use, persuasion.

Tags: insight, inheritance.

Teacher

Starting traits:

Tags:

Guardian

Starting traits:

Tags: