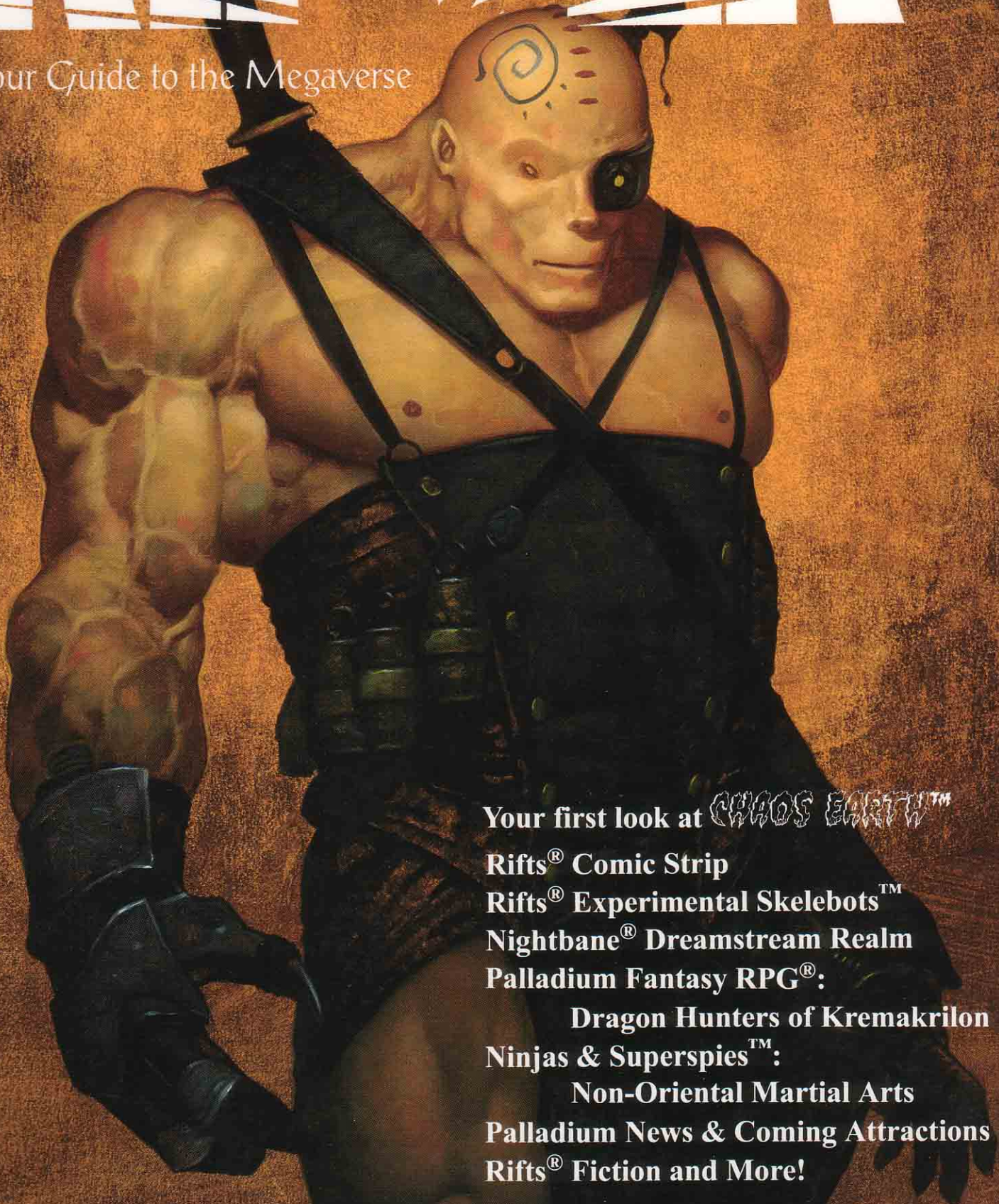


Palladium Books® Presents:

THE

RIFTER™

Your Guide to the Megaverse



Your first look at **CHAOS EARTH™**

Rifts® Comic Strip

Rifts® Experimental Skelebots™

Nightbane® Dreamstream Realm

Palladium Fantasy RPG®:

Dragon Hunters of Kremakrilon

Ninjas & Superspies™:

Non-Oriental Martial Arts

Palladium News & Coming Attractions

Rifts® Fiction and More!

Warning!

Violence and the Supernatural

The fictional Worlds of Palladium Books® are violent, deadly and filled with supernatural monsters. Other-dimensional beings, often referred to as "demons," torment, stalk and prey upon humans. Other alien life forms, monsters, gods and demigods, as well as magic, insanity, and war are all elements in this book.

Some parents may find the violence, magic and supernatural elements of the game inappropriate for young readers/players. We suggest parental discretion.

Please note that none of us at Palladium Books® condone or encourage the occult, the practice of magic, the use of drugs, or violence.



The Rifter™ Number Seven
Your guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!

**This issue is dedicated to the memory of Kevin Whitlock.
We are truly sorry he couldn't be with us to see his work in print.**

First Printing — July, 1999

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Palladium Books® Presents:

THE RIFTER

#7

Sourcebook and guide to the Palladium Megaverse®

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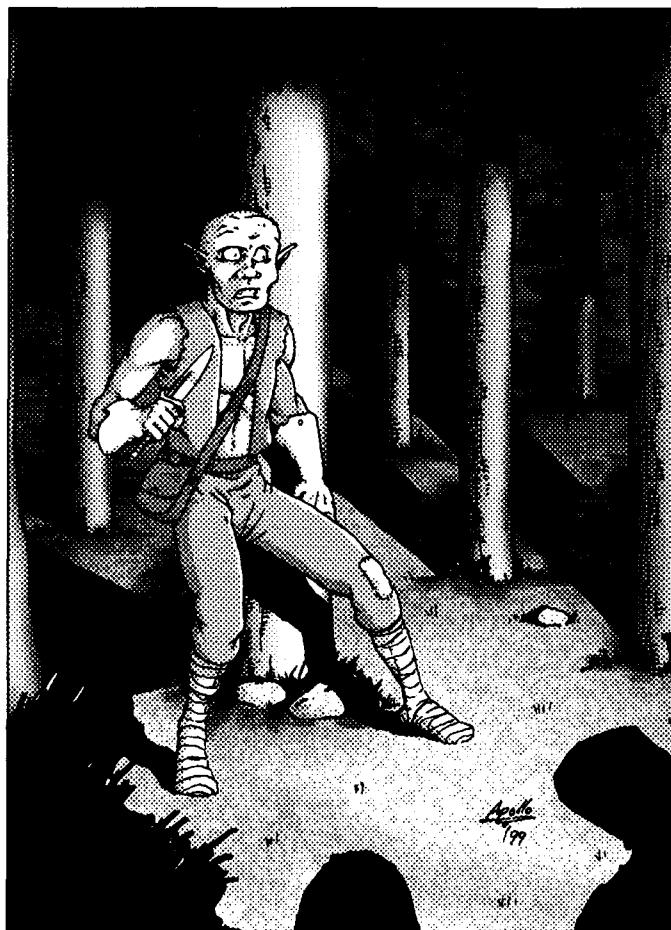
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Keylining: **Kevin Siembieda**



Based on the RPG rules, characters, concepts and Megaverse® created by **Kevin Siembieda**.

Special Thanks to Brom for his cover painting and to the all our contributors.

Our apologies to anybody who got accidentally left out or their name misspelled.

Contents — The Rifter™ #7 — July, 1999

Page 6 — Art

Newcomer Adam Kass adds his artistic vision to this issue of *The Rifter*™ starting right here.

Page 7 — From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Publisher, Kevin Siembieda, answers the eternal question: "Why are Palladium products so often delayed?" Actually, about 50% (like *The Rifter*™) come out on time, but what about those other books? The good news is big plans and lots of great product.

Page 8 — Palladium News, Info, & Coming Attractions

The *Rifts*® *Novels* are out and the response has been terrific! In fact, dozens of store owners at a recent trade show have told Palladium V.P. **Maryann** Siembieda how much they loved it, and how the distributors are having trouble keeping up with re-orders!

There are a lot of Coming Attractions this issue as Palladium Books continues to unleash its most ambitious and exciting year in a decade. Get the latest on the *Palladium Fantasy RPG*® titles, *Rifts*® *Canada and other Rifts*® *World Books*, *HU2 G.M.'s Guide*,™ and the brand new role-playing game, *Systems Failure*™ (by Bill Coffin). Fun, adventure, world-saving and more fun.

Page 13 — Knights of the Dinner Table™

Jolly **Blackburn**'s KoDT, 'nuff said!

Don't forget the KoDT comic books are available from Kenzer & Company, 1935 S. Plum Grove Rd., Suite 194, Palatine, IL, 60067.

Page 15 — Nightbane®

The Children of Domhain Dorcha

Chad Rasnake presents an optional realm of the *Dreamstream*™ and the monstrous denizen that stalk the realm (and one's dreams). Goblins, the King of Nightmares, an adventure idea and more. Artwork by Ryan Beres.

Page 31 — The Palladium Fantasy RPG®, 2nd Edition

The Dragon Hunters of Kremakrilon

A cool optional character class and adventure ideas by Jon Thompson. Includes the *Dragon Hunter O.C.C.*, special (magical) abilities and a half dozen Hook, Line & Sinker™ adventures. Artwork by Apollo Okamura.

Page 39 — For Heroes Unlimited™ and Ninjas & Superspies™

World Warriors

Ben Lucas (author of *Rifts*® Australia) presents several different styles of martial arts combat from around the world. Brazilian Jujitsu, Capoeira, Kick Boxing, **Krav Mahga**, Savate, Professional Boxing and many others. The action-packed artwork is compliments of Mike Wilson.

Page 55 — Chaos Earth™

A glimpse at the much anticipated role-playing game series by Kevin Siembieda. Just a first taste of what's to come. And the first installment of what may be a continuing series of *Chaos Earth*™ material to whet one's appetite. Art by Vince Martin.

Page 58 — Rifts®

Skelebots™: The Mechanical Menace

David Haendler presents a few *optional* new Skelebots for your consideration. They include the Sea Skelebot, Super Skelebot, and Lurker Drone. Art is by Drunken Style Studio — the Sky Cycle is by Adam Kass.

Page 70 — Rifts® Fiction

England — A Green and Unpleasant Land

A short story (complete in this issue) written by the late, Kevin F. **Whitlock**, a native of England himself. A tale of adventure, change and irony. Art is by Drunken Style Studio — page 70 is by Kevin Long (reprinted from *Rifts*® *England*).

Page 83 — The Hammer of the Forge™

The next chapter in James M. G. Cannon's *Phase World*™ story. Art by Apollo Okamura.

Page 91 — Rifts® Lone Star Comic Strip

The next rockin' installment of the *Rifts* Comic Strip. And you ain't seen nothin' yet.

Part Two of six chapters by *Ramon Perez* (Penciler, Inker, Letterer, and Co-Author) and *Coleen Laxalt* (plot and Scripiter).

Page 99 — The Siege Against Tolkeen™

The next chapters in David Haendler's *Rifts*® saga. Art by Apollo Okamura.

The Cover

Our dynamic *Brom* cover originally saw print in the *Heresy* Collectible Card Game. We thought it fit nicely with this issue's theme of martial arts, monsters, and technology.

Coming Next Issue ...

Rifter #8

Halloween Issue — October, 1999

- Eight more pages of the *Rifts*® *Lone Star* comic strip by Ramon Perez and Coleen Laxalt.
- More *Knights of the Dinner Table*™.
- Necromancer material by Mark Sumimoto for *Rifts*® *Africa* including the Cursebringer, the Murder-Mage, and the Death Walker.
- Vampire adventure for *Rifts*®.
- More material for *Palladium Fantasy RPG*®.
- Source material for *Nightbane*®.
- The next chapter of *The Hammer of the Forge*™.
- The continuing saga of *Siege Against Tolkeen*™.
- More G.M. tips.
- The latest news and developments at Palladium.
- Source material for the *Palladium Megaverse*®.

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Palladium will be at *ShoreCon* Sept. 9-12

Kevin & Maryann Siembieda, along with Bill Coffin and a couple other Palladium folk, will be attending *ShoreCon*, September 9-12, 1999, as both exhibitors and guests for all four days. This will be the last convention the Siembiedas will be attending in 1999!

Chat with them, get autographs, buy the newest Palladium products (and back stock), and enjoy the show.

Steve Jackson, Jolly Blackburn, the folks from FASA, and others will also be attending. Sounds like great fun.

ShoreCon is in New Jersey and, we are told, only about a one hour drive from *Philadelphia* and *New York City*, so come on down!

It is a big, three and a half day event (starting Thursday evening) with over 2000 gamers. Hey, if you end up going to *ShoreCon* because you heard about it from Palladium — tell the convention people that Palladium Books sent you. We hope to see you there.

For more information about *ShoreCon* contact:

Complete Strategy Gaming Inc.
2025 Old Trenton Road
West Windsor, NJ 08512
Tel. (609) 426-9339



Concept drawings of the alien invaders in the new role-playing game, *Systems Failure*™.



From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Why are Palladium Books so often delayed?

That seems to be the question of the last couple months. And a fair one.

Others ask why we announce definite dates if we can't meet them. The answer is something of a Catch 22. We announce them, because people are constantly asking us what we are planning. Also because distributors need to know what's coming, ideally 3-4 months in advance, and, lastly, because that is what we are honestly planning! We plot and estimate to the best of our ability when we think we can release the books and announce them.

Then, life gets in the way.

I actually thought about writing an article entitled *707 Reasons Why Books are Delayed* (and I could honestly come up with at least 101 reasons). One is finding good, competent help. Writers and artists who are not only excellent, but who can meet deadlines and maintain a consistent level of quality.

Another is running a business. There is a lot more to publishing than writing, editing, art, and printing, especially for me and **Maryann**. There's coordinating assignments, art direction, maintaining communications with freelancers, scheduling, payroll, juggling finances, getting financing, maintaining the office and warehouse, advertising, the web-site (building, maintaining and improving it), answering questions (by phone, mail and on-line), sales, distributor relations, shipping and receiving, legal matters (often unexpected), negotiating licenses, and other things.

And then there are the myriad problems that arise from each of the things I just noted! None of these are excuses, but sometimes I think people picture us sitting around either playing games all day or drinking a cold beverage on a hot beach somewhere. I wish!

We understand that you look forward to a particular release and are frustrated and disappointed when it comes out 2-4 months late (sometimes rescheduled entirely). But please understand that it's not because we are goofing off or don't care. We care very much, and we are even more frustrated than you because we're putting in 12-18 hour days, six and seven days a week, trying to get great product finished and we're still falling behind. Palladium's "on-site" staff is tiny compared to TSR or White Wolf and many other companies. Of course, we have a growing legion of freelancers to help compensate. The easy answer might sound like we need to hire more people, but finding good people and finding the time to train them is another problem that gobbles up time, money and causes delays. See what I mean about a Catch 22 situation?

For the present ...

Be assured that books scheduled for 1999 are finally on track. The many **Rifts® World Books** scheduled for spring are near completion and will result in at least one new **Rifts®** product every month starting in July (with three new releases counting the *Rifts® Canada World Book*, second *Rifts® Novel* and this issue of *The Rifter™*) through October. **Aliens Unlimited 2nd Edition**, **Ninja Turtles 2nd Edition** and a few others should also slip into a summer release (see the Coming

Attractions section for details). Thank you so very much for being patient and understanding. You will be happy with the final products.

Building for the future

One of the things Maryann and I have been trying to implement at Palladium is building a solid team of reliable, top-talent, freelance writers and artists. This is the only way for Palladium to produce more product and support all (or most) of our role-playing game lines — **Rifts®**, **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Palladium Fantasy RPG®**, and **Nightbane®** in particular.

Of course, the trick is to produce more while keeping the quality as high as always. Ironically, finding, cultivating and directing this ultimate creative team has taken time and energy. It is responsible, to a small degree, for some of the delays in 1998 and 1999. That's the bad news.

The good news, is that over the last year, we have put together what I think will prove to be the most amazing group of talent in the history of Palladium Books. We have more manuscripts and projects underway in advanced production than ever before (including stuff for the year 2000 and beyond that we dare not even mention yet). On the simplest level, the plan is to have regular releases for all our RPG lines and actually hit release dates better than currently, which is about 50% of the time.

What thrills and amazes me is that many of these talented writers and artists have hit their stride and are producing tremendous, high quality work. *John Zeleznik*, *Ramon Perez*, *Kent Buries*, *Wayne Breaux*, *Scott Johnson*, and *Mike Dubisch* are handing in one great job after another. In many cases, showing they have hit a new level in their artistic achievement. As for myself, I am writing faster and better than ever. I think all of us just seem to be **doing our** best work ever! And the level of excitement has never been higher. Ideas for new cool stuff for existing and new RPG lines are flying from every direction.

Of course, much of this is also due to the exciting new guys working for Palladium. Some you've already seen, others will debut soon. Writers like *Bill Coffin*, *Steve Edwards*, *Ben Lucas*, *Peter Murphy*, *Adam Chilson*, *Steve Trustrum*, *Francois DesRochers*, and a number of others. Then there are new artists like *Mike Wilson*, *Will Warren*, *Ryan Beres*, *Apollo Okamura*, *Adam Kass*, *the Drunken Studio guys* and others (including the return of *Fred Fields*). Not to mention guys like *Wayne Breaux* who do double duty as artist and writer.

I don't know, maybe Palladium will always be late on certain products no matter how hard we try to meet deadlines.

However, I can promise you that we will always try to make the most dynamic, exciting and fun products we can imagine! Those are the magic ingredients of our books. My legion of new artists and writers and I have a zillion cool ideas we plan to share over the next several years. New items like **Systems Failure™** and the many **Rifts® World Books** coming out, along with plans for **Beyond the Supernatural™ Second Edition** and **Mechanoid Space™** (probably year 2000 releases) are just the "tip" of the proverbial iceberg.

— Kevin Siembieda, July 1999

Palladium News, Info, & Coming Attractions

By Kevin Siembieda (the guy in the know)

News

There's nothing earth-shattering that I would consider news. We've got a potentially exciting licensing deal that's been hanging out in limbo, but until we have something concrete we're not saying a word. Otherwise, we are focusing on getting out the products we promised, and are already developing stuff for 2000. We aren't revealing what until we have "finished" product and some "firm" release dates. Maybe in the October issue of *The Rifter™*.

Meanwhile, we have plenty in store for the last half of 1999. Read on.

See you in San Diego?

Maryann and I will be wandering around at the **San Diego Comic-Con International**, August 12-15. If you see us, stop and say hello. John Zeleznik has a booth there too. We're scoping it out to see if we should get a booth at the Comic-Con in 2000. What do you think, should we? San Diego is a cool place and we hear the gaming part of the convention has grown considerably.

Don't forget, we won't be at Gen Con®.

Rifts® Novels are Launched

The first **Rifts® Novel**, *Sonic Boom*, has met with much fanfare and smiling faces.

Palladium has received dozens and dozens of positive fan comments and e-mail in just the first couple weeks of the novel's **release** (as I write this, it is only June 6th). The overwhelming response has been, "We like it a lot. When are the next two coming out!?" And while most everybody likes it, about a third of the readers seem to absolutely love it!

Likewise, many stores have blown the novels out the door in a matter of days and reorders are strong. Only a tiny percentage (so far) don't seem to like it and even half of these folks are looking forward to the next two (go figure).

This is not to say that the "launch" wasn't shaky and didn't have its share of problems. **Sonic Boom** looks gorgeous with slick packaging and a dynamic Johnny Z cover. The intro is strong and the opening to the book is nothing short of pulse-pounding. Unfortunately, the entire book suffers from typesetting glitches and poor editing. Thankfully, not enough to ruin the enjoyment of the story.

The problem arose in that the "pocketbook novel" is not only a new format for Palladium Books but a new type of product. Our trusty regular printer was not used to the pocketbook size, so we had to try a *new printer*. This created its own set of delays

and problems. The one that most directly impacted you, our readers, was the **printer's** promise of a three week turnaround that turned into six! The other headaches were mostly ours to deal with (we were disappointed with the printing, trim and paper quality, among other things). That means **Sonic Boom** is the first and last novel to be printed by these jokers. In fact, Palladium will be spending approximately 35% more to insure top quality in future novels.

Another problem was the new typesetting program and trying to rush the book out for our anxious readers (only to be delayed by the printer. Talk about frustration).

Lastly, other than the packaging, I had little to do with the production of the novel (giving me time to work on our many **RPG** projects). This meant Maryann and some of the guys had to fly solo on a new format and product line. They stumbled and made mistakes, but they have learned, and future novels *will* be significantly freer of editing and typesetting problems. Thankfully, none of these glitches were enough to ruin the fun of the story. And fun is the whole idea.

So those of you who anxiously await the second novel, **Deception's Web**, fear not. Even as I write this (June 6, 1999), the second novel is on its way to the printer and will be in stores around the Fourth of July weekend! Final editing of the third book in the **Rifts® Trilogy** is well underway and should be out in August!

Rifts® Novels

Novel One: Sonic Boom centers around a squad of Coalition soldiers on a "seek and destroy" mission to eradicate a rebel group known as "The Army of the New Order." A task they find to be more daunting and dangerous than expected. As the hunt unfolds, the plot thickens, twists, and leads to the Federation of Magic. The **cliffhanger** ending leaves the reader panting for more.

Cat. No. 301

Retail Price: \$7.95

Page Count: 416 pages.

Cover: Coalition soldier by John Zeleznik.

Written by: Adam Chilson

Available now at stores everywhere! It's selling fast and some stores and distributors have underestimated the demand for this product, so you may have to special order it.

Novel Two: Deception's Web starts with a bang and keeps on going. The Coalition soldiers under the command of Lieutenant Michael Sorenson fight their way back to civilization where they are faced with startling revelations, a court-martial and

treachery. The lives they have known and the people they trust collide with events and realizations that will strain friendships and test their loyalty to the Coalition States. Hard choices, strange bedfellows, a living enigma, and the hand of evil all play a role in *Rifts®: Deception's Web*.

Cat. No. 302

Retail Price: \$7.95

Page Count: 416 pages.

Cover: A Glitter Boy by Patrick Ho.

Written by: Adam Chilson

Date of Release: Early July.

Novel Three: Treacherous Awakenings. This is the big finale. Questions are answered and conflicts are resolved, but perhaps not quite the way the reader imagined. Or quite as we imagined. We did not realize this last book in the Chilson trilogy was so huge! Over 600 pages. Unfortunately that means we will have to charge more for it; probably \$8.95 or even \$9.95, we hope you understand.

Cat. No. 303

Retail Price: Undetermined; \$8.95 or \$9.95 due to its size.

Page Count: 600+ pages.

Cover by: Not yet determined,

Written by: Adam Chilson

Date of Release: Mid to Late August, 1999.

Coming Attractions

Palladium Fantasy

Hey, if you missed the **Baalgor Wastelands™** or **Mount Nimro™** sourcebooks and love Palladium Fantasy, you are missing a couple of treasures. Both came out this Spring, are great fun and filled with valuable information.

The Eastern Territory™

For The Palladium Fantasy RPG®, 2nd Ed.

The Eastern Territory is the heart of the Domain of Man. A vast wilderness that is enjoying a boom-time with thousands upon thousands of human settlers spilling into the region not unlike the settlers of the Old American West. And like the Old West, the Eastern Territory is often a wild and lawless place attracting heroes and villains, settlers and mercenaries, incredible opportunities for those bold enough to seize them, and terrible dangers for all. Join the excitement, intrigue and adventure.

- **History and world information.**
- **Key towns, fledgling kingdoms, and places of note.**
- **Notable movers and shakers; good and evil.**
- **Conflicts, treachery, dangerous pacts and raw adventure.**
- **New O.C.C.s like the **Sword-Wizards** and others.**

- **Maps, adventures and adventure ideas.**
- **Artwork by Perez, Buries, Dubisch and Johnson.**
- **Cover not yet determined.**
- **Written by Steve Edwards, with additional material by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **\$20.95 — 224 pages, coming this Fall.**



Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Ed. Game Masters' Guide™

A big sourcebook and adventure book with G.M. guidelines, reference information, playing tips, optional rules, how to make your own adventures, clarifications, additional equipment, new characters, new villains, adventures and adventure ideas.

Although titled "G.M.'s Guide," much of the material is valuable to players as well, and there is even a **section for players** on how to improve and play their characters.

- **Over 20 new supervillains.**
- **Rampage and brawling combat rules.**
- **Over 60 new magic spells.**
- **Creating and running villains.**
- **Quick Roll rules for creating NPC villains.**
- **Vigilantes and the law.**
- **Crime and punishment.**
- **Secret identities.**
- **Questions & Answers.**
- **Creating & running adventures.**
- **Adventure creation tables and ideas.**
- **Listings of new weapons, vehicles & equipment.**

- **Vehicles and equipment.**
- **10 complete adventures and more.**
- **Cover by John Zeleznik.**
- **Interior Art: Wilson, Breaux and others.**
- **Written by Wayne Breaux & Kevin Siembieda.**
- **\$20.95 — 224 pages.**
- **Available now!**

Aliens Unlimited® for HU2™

A revised edition of **Aliens Unlimited™** will be released this Summer, making it completely compatible with *Heroes Unlimited, Second Edition (HU2)*. All the same great stuff is kept with some new bits of artwork and a smattering of new material.

- **Over 100 different alien races.**
- **New (alien) super abilities and bionics.**
- **Spaceships and creation rules.**
- **An evil alien Empire and secret organizations.**
- **New (alien) super abilities.**
- **Alien magic.**
- **Secret UFO watch groups.**
- **Written by Wayne Breaux with Kevin Siembieda.**
- **Cover & art by Wayne Breaux Jr.**
- **\$20.95 — over 190 pages.**
- **August release.**

Coming for Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Ed.

The following books are currently being written as **HU2** sourcebooks. One may slip into a late 1999 release, the others will be for the year 2000.

Century City™

Anarchy Unlimited™

Hardware Unlimited™

... and more!

Don't Forget

Ninjas & Superspies™, Mystic China™, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles® 2nd Ed., The Compendium of Contemporary Weapons™, and Skraypers™, all of which are directly compatible with **HU2™**!

Ninja Turtles RPG, 2nd Edition

The expanded edition of this best-selling RPG will include character & world updates, new villains, the mutant underground, new artwork, new cover, and over 20 pages of additional material.

A stand alone, 128 page role-playing game that has been enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of gamers for years is being made even better. Updated rules, new artwork, new cover and new material, including the mutant underground. Suitable as a 100% compatible mutant animal sourcebook for **Heroes Unlimited, 2nd Ed.**

The delay of this game is entirely my fault (Kevin Siembieda). Keeping up with the record number of releases for our many different product lines has caused some delays and forced me to reschedule a few titles. **TMNT, 2nd Edition** is one of those. I'm shooting for a late summer release (probably August), but it may slip into the fall. I just don't know at this time.

- **Cover by Simon Bisley**
- **Interior Art: The Parente Studio, Jim Lawson, Eastman, Laird and others.**
- **Written by Erick Wujcik and Kevin Siembieda.**
- **A complete role-playing game. Cat. No. 502-2**
- **\$12.95 — 128 pages.**

A Rifts® Summer & Fall

Rifts® fans, do not despair! The summer and fall of 1999 will be filled with cool **Rifts®** products.

- The first **Rifts® Novel: Sonic Boom** is in stores right now.
- The second novel, **Deception's Web**, should also be in stores right now (or arriving any minute).
- **Rifts® Canada** should hit stores sometime toward the end of July.
- **Rifts® Atlantis Two: Splynn Dimensional Market**, the first or second week of August.
- The third novel, **Treacherous Awakenings**, the end of August.
- **Rifts® Free Quebec**, September.
- **Rifts® Xiticix Invasion**, October.
- **The Rifter™ #8**, October.
- Plus **Rifts® Australia Two & Three** will be slipped in there somewhere (November and December?).

That's nine **Rifts®** products by the end of the year! Don't believe it? Just wait and see. All these books are in some stage of production even as you read this. No more delays, so get ready to cut loose!

Rifts® World Book 20:

Rifts® Canada™

Ships end of July (honest)

As I write this news and coming attractions section, it interrupts the final stages of writing for **Rifts® Canada**. The goal of Eric Thompson and I is to present an overview of *Rifts Canada* with a closer look at some of the *key* people, organizations and places in this part of the world. Of course, Canada is huge, and one book cannot begin to do it justice, so it will be the first of several over the next few years. **Free Quebec** will quickly follow, and future books will include the *City of Lazlo* and the *Ruins of Windsor (and Detroit)* among others.

- **Rules for surviving a cold wilderness environment.**
- **Notable towns and independent kingdoms.**

- Tundra Rangers and other O.C.C.s.
- An in-depth look at Headhunters & Mercenaries.
- The Inuit people and their brand of magic.
- The cyborg Xion Centaurs.
- Monsters of the North.
- A smattering of new weapons and vehicles.
- Tons of world information.
- Cover by: John Zeleznik.
- Interior Art: Perez, Buries, Breaux and others.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda & Eric Thompson.
- Retail Price: The final size and price are not yet determined. If 160 pages (as originally planned) \$16.95, but \$20.95 if it ends up a big 200+ pages.

Rifts® World Book 21 (Atlantis Book Two):

Splynn Dimensional Market™ Ships early August

Mark Sumimoto with Kevin Siembieda present one of the wonders of Rifts Earth — the *Dimensional Market at Splynn*, in Atlantis. A place where it is said that anything, and everything, including people, have a price.

- The market described and mapped.
- Exotic people, slaves and products.
- More magic and magical weapons.
- More about Tattooed Men and Tattoo Magic.
- Dozens of new Symbiotes and Parasites used in Bio-Wizardry.
- New Rune weapons and Bio-Wizard devices.
- The monstrous Bio-Borg™ and much more.
- Wrap-Around Cover by John Zeleznik.
- Interior Art: Perez, Buries, Breaux, & Dubisch.
- Written by Mark Sumimoto with Kevin Siembieda.
- 160 pages — \$16.95 retail.

Rifts® World Book 22:

Free Quebec™ Ships September

An in-depth look at the renegade Coalition State of Free Quebec, their battle to break free of the CS, and their preparations for war. Francois DesRochers and Kevin Siembieda outline the only technological power in North America to rival that of Chi-Town. But can they survive the might of the combined Coalition States?



- **Notable people, places and alliances.**
- **The Military force of the free nation, including new types of Glitter Boys and other weapons.**
- **Politics, intrigue and war! 'Nuff said.**
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Deep down, you always knew the end was near. And that Y2K was only the beginning.

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Because when all the computers and power grids crashed on January 1, 2000, you immediately realized it **wasn't** just a technological glitch. It had to be part of something bigger.

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Inspired by the Y2K paranoia, I came up with concepts and ideas for a role-playing game that would play on that paranoia and have fun with the classic theme of the collapse of civilization with the advent of the new millennium. A fun, action-packed game that would, to a limited degree, spoof society and the end of the world, yet at the same time could be played seriously (or not). My problem was I didn't have time to write it! I was already late on several **Rifts®** titles (not to mention **TMNT® 2nd Edition**) and had to focus my attention to get them finished and out to the stores. Not wanting to let this cool idea go, I thought about which of my freelancers could write it. What about Bill Coffin?

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If you're looking for a summer of wild adventure and non-stop action, this is the role-playing game for you!

LOOK GUYS, I KNOW YOU THINK IT'S A **GREAT IDEA** TO USE BRIAN'S ROP OF PLANE BREACHING TO CROSS OVER INTO **VALHALLA** BUT LET ME TAKE OFF MY **GM'S HAT** FOR A SECOND HERE. I'M GOING TO BE **BLUNT** - THERE'S SIMPLY **NO WAY** YOU'LL SURVIVE. **VALHALLA IS A DEATH TRAP!**

WELL, WELL, LOOKS LIKE **SOMEBODY** DOESN'T WANT US FOLLOWING **ODIN** INTO HIS HOME PLANE!

A DEATH TRAP? SOUNDS LIKE A WRITTEN INVITATION TO ME.

MAYBE WE SHOULD TAKE HIS ADVICE, GUYS!

NICE TRY, B.A. BUT NOBODY WUSS-SLAPS TEFLON BILLY AND GETS AWAY WITH IT. I DON'T CARE IF **ODIN IS A GAWD** - HE'S GONNA PAY!

GUYS, I'M NOT JOKING HERE. IF YOU **INSIST ON CHALLENGING A GAWD ON HIS TURF**, YOU'RE ALL GOING TO DIE! YOU'VE INVESTED WAY TOO MUCH TIME INTO THIS CAMPAIGN TO JUST **THROW AWAY** YOUR CHARACTERS LIKE THIS.

BESIDES, IF YOU GO TRAMPING OFF TO ANOTHER PLANE YOU'RE GOING TO **TRASH** THE ADVENTURE I HAD PLANNED.

LOOK OUT EVERYBODY! B.A. IS ABOUT TO RUN US OVER WITH THE PLOT **WAGON AGAN**. GAWD FORBID WE SHOULD HAVE AN **ORIGINAL THOUGHT** OR ATTEMPT TO DO SOMETHING HE DOESN'T WANT US TO DO.

OH COME ON! IT'S NOT LIKE THAT. I WAS JUST TRYING TO WARN YOU....

YOU GOT US ALL **HEMMEDED IN** FOR CRYING OUT LOUD. WE CAN'T DO **ANYTHING** WITHOUT GETTING **PRODDED** BACK TO YOUR PRECIOUS STORY LINE.

THIS **BLOWS!**

FOR CRYING OUT LOUD! YOU WANT TO CHALLENGE A **MAJOR GAWD** ON HIS HOME PLANE?? I'M WARNING YOU - DO THIS AND THE **ONLY THING YOU'LL HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD TO IS THE PROMISE OF PEATNF**

PROMISE OF DEATH? WHY YOU GOTTA START MAKING CHILDISH THREATS FOR?

YEAH. HOW COME IT'S ALWAYS GOT TO BE **YOUR WAY**.

POOR B.A.!

LOOK YOU **IDIOTS!** ALL I'M TRYING TO DO IS PREVENT YOU **MORONS** FROM COMMITTING **SUICIDE!** DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW **POWERFUL ODIN IS?** HUH? NOT TO MENTION HE'S THE **NEAP GAWD** OF A VERY POWERFUL **PANTHEON**. DO YOU HONESTLY **THINK** THE OTHER GAWDS ARE GOING TO IDLY SIT BACK AND ALLOW YOU TO WAGE WAR ON THEIR LEADER? **GET REAL!**

THE BASTARD **STOMPED** ON ME WITH HIS **SANDALS OF INDIFFERENCE!**

HE DREW **FIRST BLOOD!** HE'S GOT SOME **PAYBACK COMMN!**

YEAH, IT WAS AN **UNPROVOKED ATTACK!**

FIRST BLOOD? ARE YOU GUYS FORGETTING HOW YOU **TORCHED HIS TEMPLE IN RUGGER STOWN?** OR HOW YOU HUNG HIS ALL HIS **PRIESTS??** YOU PAREP HIM TO SHOW HIMSELF AND **INTERVENE - REMEMBER??**

WELL, WISE GUYS. HE **SNOWEP** HIMSELF.

IT WAS JUST A **TEST!** WE'RE SICK OF **GAWDS** WHO **NEVER INTERVENE** AND **STICK UP** FOR THEIR FOLLOWERS. THAT'S WHY I **DUMPED** MY LAME-ASS PATRON GAWD, **LUVIA!**

YOU DESTROYED A TEMPLE AND KILLED ALL ITS PRIESTS AS A TEST?

DAMN STRAIGHT IT WAS A TEST. THOSE **DIVINE INTERVENTION MODIFIERS** LISTED IN THE BOOK FOR **ODIN** SEEMED A LITTLE **BOGUS!**

WE DIDN'T EXPECT HIM TO BE SUCH A **JERK!**

OKAY FOLKS. I EXPECT **CASUALTIES!** THIS ISN'T GOING TO BE A CAKE WALK BY ANY MEANS. ANYONE WHO WANTS TO **BACK OUT** MAY DO SO NOW. I PROMISE NOT TO **HECKLE YOU** OR ANYTHING. BUT I DO THINK **THIS DUDE IS BEATABLE**. THOSE WHO GO IN STAND TO WIN LOTS OF TREASURE AND EXPERIENCE.

YOU BET THERE'LL BE **CASUALTIES. LOTS OF THEM!**

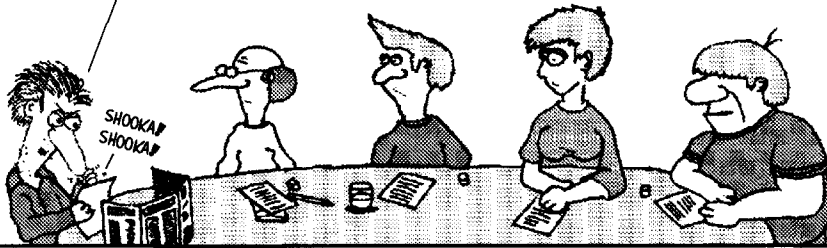
WELL.... YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY, TODAY IS A **GOOD DAY TO DIE!** LET'S GO FOR IT.

WHAT THE HELL I'M IN.

SEE YOU IN HELL BOYS.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER...

OKAY. **ODIN** RIPS **KNUCKLE'S** SOUL FROM HIS BODY AND **TOSSES** IT TO HIS GIANT WOLF **FREKE** WHO **QUICKLY** DEVOURS IT. MEANWHILE, **FRIGGA** ENGAGES **EL RAVAGER** AND TRAPS HIM IN A **SPHERE OF INSANITY!** THIS CAUSES **EL RAVAGER'S** IP TO ATTEMPT TO ASSASSINATE HIS EGO. I'LL HAVE TO ROLL TO SEE IF HIS **SUPEREGO** INTERVENES.



SHOOKA!
SHOOKA!

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? I MEAN DAMN DUDE. **ODIN** WAS STANDING **RIGHTTHERE!**

I THOUGHT YOU GUYS WERE GOING TO DISTRACT HIM!

DISTRACT HIM? WHILE YOU CARRIED OFF THE **GATES OF VALHALLA?**

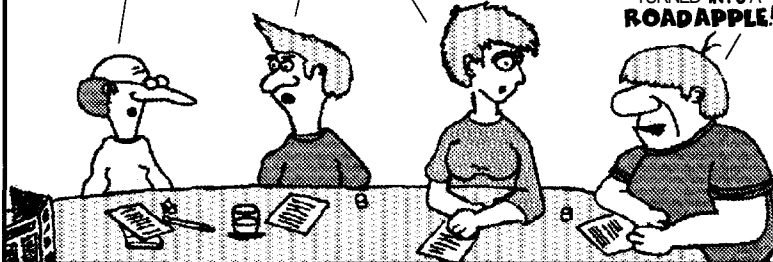


HEY THOSE BABIES WERE **SOLID GOLD!** I'M A **DWARF** REMEMBER? THOSE **GATES** WERE JUST A **LITTLE MORE** TEMPTATION THAN I COULD STAND.

WELL, YOU COULD HAVE GIVEN ME A **HEADSUP** BEFORE YOU **RIPPED** THEM OFF THEIR HINGES AND **STARTED** RUNNING AWAY WITH THEM.

I CANT BELIEVE HE TURNED ME INTO A **SMALL STONE.**

WHAT ARE YOU COMPLAINING ABOUT? I GOT TURNED INTO A **ROADAPPLE!**

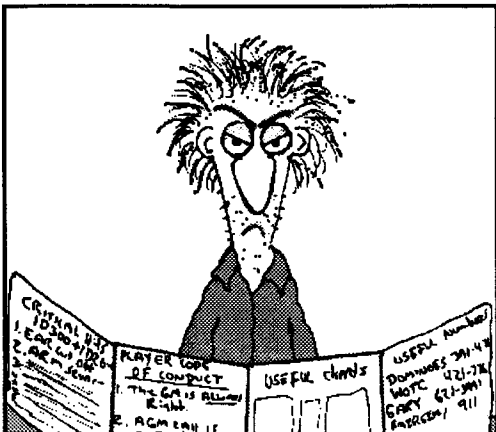
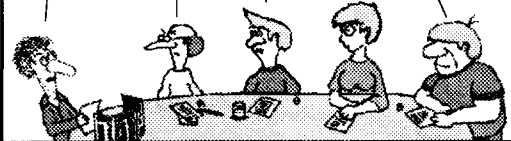


OKAY, OKAY, **HANA**. REAL FUNNY. SO WHAT'S THIS GUY WANT ANYWAY? AN APOLOGY? RESTITUTION? WHAT?

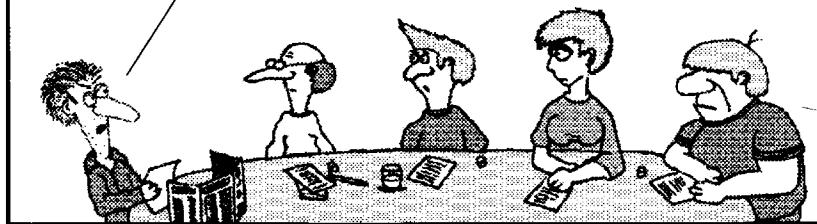
AN APOLOGY?

HEY THAT'S A **GREAT IDEA!** B.A. I GIVE OL' **ODIN** A **REALLY** SINCERE, HEART FELT APOLOGY AND STUFF. IF IT HELPS MODIFY MY ROLL I'LL EVEN CRY AND GROVEL

YO. PUT ME DOWN FOR SOME GROVELING TOO.!



LET ME GIVE YOU GUYS SOME **REALLY GOOD** ADVICE. TAKE THOSE CHARACTER SHEETS YOU HAVE IN FRONT OF YOU AND **TEAR THEM** INTO TINY LITTLE BITS 'CUZ **THEY'RE PEAP!** CAN I MAKE IT ANY CLEARER THAN THAT?

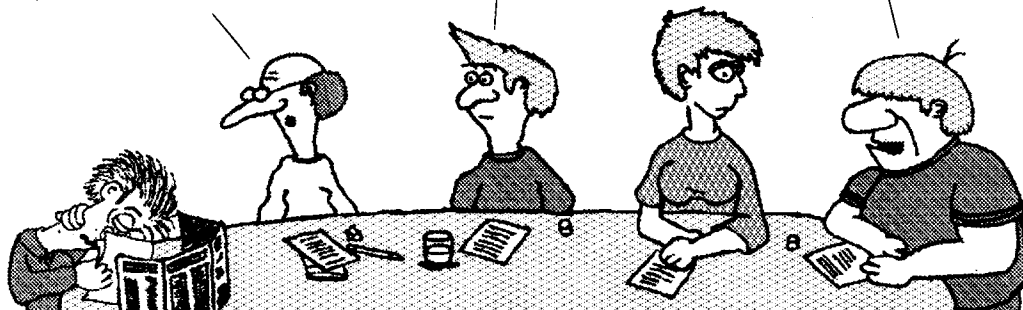


SECONDS LATER...

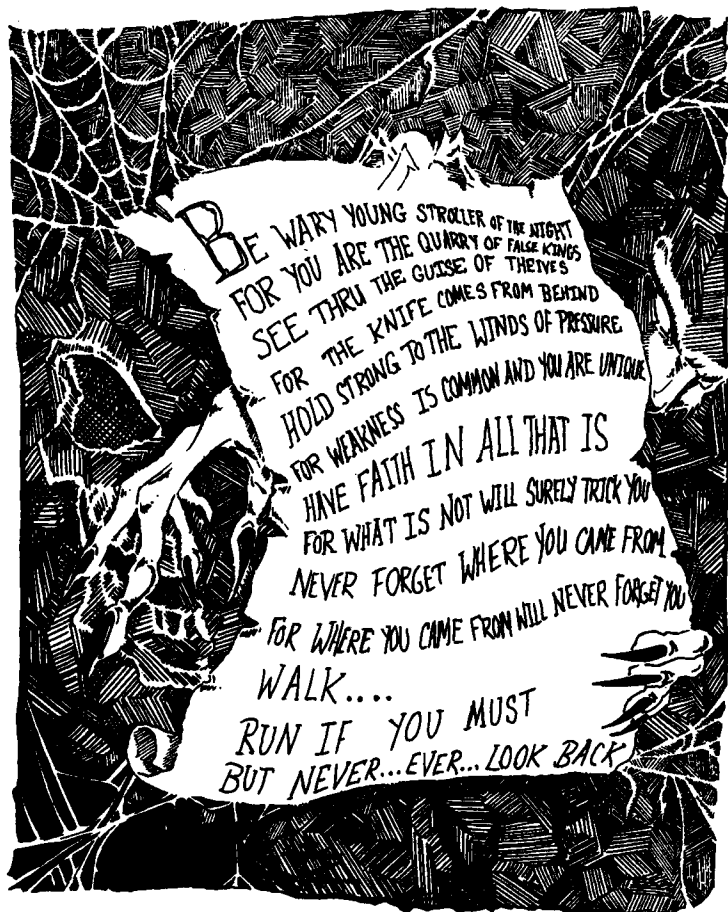
YOU NEVER ANSWERED MY QUESTION. HOW MANY **EXPERIENCE POINTS** WERE THOSE **GOLDEN GATES** WORTH? HUH?

CAN MY **SUPEREGO** LAY HANDS ON MY IP?

YOU KNOW, I NEVER FIGURED B.A. FOR A **KILLER G.M.!**



Nightbane®



The Children of Domhain Dorcha

Optional New Creatures
and Information for Nightbane®

By Chad Rasnake

The Children of Domhain Dorcha are somewhat akin to Dream Ghouls, in that they like to haunt the dreams of children and, in some ways, feed upon the fear reaction they cause. But in other ways, the Children are more like the Nightbane, in that they were once humans, themselves children who have become enamored with the shadows, drawn into the night. But if they are related to the Nightbane race, few (if any) can tell what that relationship might be.

"Once you have spent a night here, child, you will become one with Domhain Dorcha, to live in this place of dreams and lost things. Beware that you do not become one of us, those who fear the light, play pranks from the shadows. Go home, pass through the Ceiling before the sun rises, and take care not to fall through again."

— Marathon of the Narcelesti

Imagine that you are a child again. You are perhaps 5 or 6 years old, lying in bed, awake because you are afraid to go to sleep. Afraid of the monsters living under your bed. Or in your closet. Or in the cellar, where you hear noises your parents tell you are just the water heater, but you know are really some beast's stomach growling as he prepares to snack on child's flesh.

Now you are an adult again, and you know for sure that those monsters in your closet were never really there — it was just your imagination. But then again, you also once "knew" that it was impossible for the entire world to go dark for a day. You also "knew" that things like Bigfoot and UFOs and supernatural beings from the other side of the mirror weren't real either.

You know different now. You've seen monsters strolling down Broadway, looking to the marks like just another human being. You've seen psychics that tap into the human mind's infinite power, and modern-day Merlins turning water into wine. So why are those monsters in the closet so hard to believe in?

The Goblins and the Children of Domhain Dorcha are those creatures in your closet and under your bed. Among them are the Boogey-Man and Jack of the Whills. In reality, they don't live in those places, but instead are from another plane of existence called Domhain Dorcha, or the Under-Realm. It is in those dark places, where we can't see if they exist, that the monsters can slip through the cracks in realities and haunt not just your dreams, but your real life too.

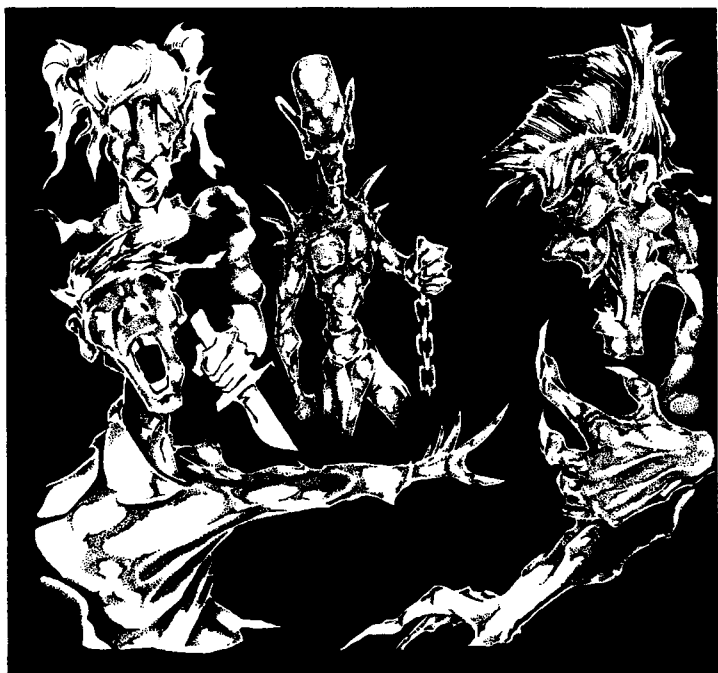
Domhain Dorcha — a Special Part of the Dreamstream

Domhain Dorcha is a special place within the Dreamstream. It is perhaps the part of man's subconscious that is closest (psychically speaking) to the physical world. It both exists and doesn't exist in the places of our childhood fears — the dark cellars, the closets, and under our beds — those places where we imagined (or thought we imagined) monsters, ready to spring out. The ancient Celts knew of this place and called it the Under-Realm, where the Dark Fey lived. To some modern bards and psychics, it is called the Innocent's Dreaming.

In some ways, Domhain Dorcha might be considered some sort of Nightlands mirror of the Dreamstream; it is, but not exactly. While Domhain Dorcha and the Nightlands share some elements, Domhain Dorcha (as part of the Dreamstream) is more intimately linked with Earth (more people to dream there).

The main features that distinguish Domhain Dorcha, the **Under-Realm**, from the rest of the Dreamstream are its portals to the physical world, similar to windows into the dream-world. Every closet, the space under every sleeper's bed, is a potential portal into (and out of) Domhain Dorcha. The Children, who have been seduced into spending a night and a day in the Innocent's Dreaming, all can access and use these dark spaces as portals to and from their world of dreams. There they think they are safe, for few others can follow.

A few dream psychics have in the past managed to find their way into Domhain Dorcha (usually through other parts of the Dreamstream), and anyone accompanied (willingly or unwillingly) by one of the Children or Goblins can pass through the floor and into the shadows. Also, a pure innocent who has seen the Children with his own eyes can occasionally pass through; usually a child looking to confront his nocturnal fears.



While the Children and Goblins that live in the **Under-Realm** can use these portals to get into Domhain Dorcha, most others (with the exceptions mentioned above) will find their way blocked (G.M.'s discretion whether or not a particular character can enter or not). Interestingly enough, anyone that enters Domhain Dorcha, willingly or unwillingly, can get out through these portals in closets and under beds.

Another aspect of these portals is that they can also be used by anyone with the psychic ability to Dreamdance to enter straight into the Dream Pool of the person sleeping in that bed or nearest to that closet. In game terms, treat this as normal dream combat (see *Between the Shadows*), but the Dream Pool is -2 to save vs. intrusion. Entering a person's Dream Pool via one of these portals does not require any P.P.E. or I.S.P. to be expended (just to have the ability).

The trick is, all of the portals to Domhain Dorcha are only accessible during the night! This means that the part of

Domhain Dorcha that can be escaped or entered shifts with the day, gradually moving from east to west. Only the most powerful dwellers of the Realm, such as the Boogey-Man, can "force" open a portal under a bed or in a closet during the daytime. And any human trapped in Domhain Dorcha during the day will begin their slow permutation into one of the Children!

Accessing the Under-Realm from within the Dreamstream is easy; it is known to most experienced dream travelers (5th level and higher). All passage to and from Domhain Dorcha from other parts of the Dreamstream is not restricted at all, whether it be night or day — dream travel isn't restricted by the portals.

When you enter Domhain Dorcha, you find yourself passing through the ceiling, as if entering into a dark cellar. Around you, the world is eternal twilight, as if you were in the Nightlands. Above you is what appears to be a solid wood ceiling. You are standing on the top of a long staircase, and around you a multitude of other stairways rise, some elegant, Victorian staircases with elaborately carved railings, others rickety wood steps, still others just rope ladders, and everything in between. Each stairway leads to a spot in the wooden Ceiling that, if you attempt to pass through, will lead to a different bed or closet.

Like in the rest of the Dreamstream, distance is distorted in Domhain Dorcha. The space between two sleepers is still determined by their emotional links, but, in Domhain Dorcha, physical places also have dark counterparts as in the Nightlands. But instead of the sprawling, gothic cities of the Ba'al, there are instead only small dwellings of Children and Goblins that gather there to prey on the inhabitants above them. The cities appear to be nothing more than run-down wooden buildings, like ones that were built 150 years ago or more. Most of their windows are broken, out of sheer spite and mischief.

Space is distorted in Domhain Dorcha to the point that an average person could cover the distance between the **Under-Realm's** equivalents of New York and L.A. in the space of a few hours! This means that the Children and the Goblins that live there can (and often do) use the Under-Realm as a quick means of traversing from one end of the material world to the other. Their range of preying is wide, but still limited to the **nighttime** (but remember that which portals are open at any time shifts as the sun rises and sets in new places).

Interestingly enough, despite (or perhaps because of) the differences in space between the Under-Realm and the "real" world, time runs at the same rate in both worlds. This also means that once a human spends a night (8 to 12 hours) in Domhain Dorcha, they begin the slow metamorphosis into one of the Children!

This brings up yet another strange aspect of the Under-Realm. Any human being caught overnight in Domhain Dorcha begins a slow, sometimes painful mutation into one of the Children of the Under-Realm! The poor victim finds himself changing, his features shifting to any of a myriad of freakish forms. Some are unwilling, children kidnaped and held in the dark of the Dreaming, but most others have become seduced by the lure of the freedom of the Dreamstream and the Under-Realm, and wish for this change (see the character stats for the Children, below).

For centuries, Domhain Dorcha was relegated to myth and fantasy, as were most kids' reports of monsters under the bed or in the closet. For most people, the thought of real monsters existing was absurd.

Then the Dark Day came, and the world's nightmares swept the Dreamstream. The Dream Storms themselves shook and darkened Domhain Dorcha. The world's magic energies burst into fury, and the Goblins and Children found themselves awash in new power.

It then became apparent, from their excursions in both the Dreamstream and the real world, that an influx of supernatural beings had occurred. The leaders of the real world were no longer human; the number of Nightbane had exploded, and vampires walked the night. The Boogey-Man has seen his chance, and he is readying his Children and the Goblins for war!

Notes on Domhain Dorcha

Domhain Dorcha, while technically part of the Dreamstream, is at least partially grounded to the material world. This means that, while powers that manipulate dreams (such as those of the Dream Maker and Dream Dancer) still work in Domhain Dorcha, there are some notable differences between the effects of the two places. These are:

1. **Entering Domhain Dorcha** through one of the typical portals under beds, closets, etc. does not require using a **Dreamdance-type** power. The characters and any objects they have on them are not changed to dream S.D.C., and living creatures remain with their regular Hit Points/S.D.C. However, going to other parts of the Dreamstream from the **Under-Realm** requires either Dreamdance power or their equivalent (and remember that when using Dreamdance: Minor, the character's physical body will remain in Domhain Dorcha). The only other way to get to other parts of the Dreamstream from this place is to find or create a dream window or portal. The only known naturally occurring portal between Domhain Dorcha and the rest of the Dreamstream is under the control of the Boogey-Man.

Entering Domhain Dorcha from the rest of the Dreamstream is just like entering a Dream Pool (and it even shares a similar appearance, though three times the size of your average sleeper's dream pool). The only difference is that the membrane between the Under-Realm and the Dreamstream is very weak (-8 to save vs. intrusion), and almost any dream traveler can enter.

2. Dream manipulation and Domhain Dorcha: All powers that alter dreams, such as those of the Dream Maker and Dream Dancer (creating dream objects, for example) can be used normally while in Domhain Dorcha. Any objects created from dream matter will work normally there, also. However, a dream object will fade away instantly if it is brought into the material world. See the section in *Between the Shadows on Dream Combat and Dreamstream P.C.C.s*.

3. Travelers arriving in Domhain Dorcha do not suffer from Dream-Blindness (see *Between the Shadows*, p. 82). The link between the Under-Realm and the material world provides an anchor that prevents this **disorientation**.

4. All devices from the material realm that are brought into Domhain Dorcha will function normally. Note, however, that psychics who can manipulate dream-reality can possibly negate or otherwise affect such devices (i.e., cause a breakdown, etc.). Any damage caused to an object by those kinds of powers will be real and will still be around if that object is brought back into the material world.

5. All powers, talents, spells, and psychic abilities a being possesses in the physical world work exactly the same in Domhain Dorcha. This includes abilities like telepathy that usually work differently while in the Dreamstream. Any modifications made do not apply in the Under-Realm.

6. Any dream beings or entities such as Living Nightmares, Guilt Eaters, and Dream Ghouls, can also enter Domhain Dorcha. In this realm, they become just as solid and tangible as anything else there. Their S.D.C. remains the same, or if they can exist in the physical world, they revert to that form.

If a character enters Domhain Dorcha from the rest of the Dreamstream using Dreamdance: Superior or its equivalent (Dreamer talent, etc.) they automatically revert to their material form, and regular **S.D.C./Hit Points**.

Characters using the minor Dreamdance ability will be solid and tangible (like any other dream entity) but will remain as dream S.D.C. (and will, if their dream form is destroyed while there, return to their bodies as usual). A character like this (whose physical body is elsewhere) cannot enter the material world through Domhain Dorcha's "ceiling" portals — they will find their way blocked. However, they can use the portals to enter sleepers' Dream Pools, as usual (see above).

Unlike in the other parts of the Dreamstream, Nightbane who enter Domhain Dorcha are not forced into their **Morphus** form.

The Goblins

The other inhabitants of Domhain Dorcha are the Goblins. No one knows where these Fey come from; some have suggested they were a race spawned in the Dreamstream of man's dark fears and nightmares. Others have pointed to the Nightlands, a place strangely linked with Domhain Dorcha.

But there is another legend about the Goblins, connecting them with the ancient Celtic god Dagda, the World-Singer (this is not related to the so-called god known as Dagda of Rifts Earth — see **Rifts World Book 3: England**). It is said that the Goblins were chosen by the Singer of Worlds from among the Faerie to become the Gatekeepers, guardians and patrons of gateways, portals, bridges, and the like. The Gatekeepers were to keep forces of evil from gaining passage through such places, keeping the balance of the Life-Maze, the Mor Cylche.

It was after the creation of the Goblins (or Gatekeepers as they were called then) that the Dark is said to have cursed them. The once smart and handsome Gatekeepers were warped and twisted by the Dark's malevolent intent, becoming cunning, ugly, and greedy. Interestingly enough, the Goblins (as they came to be called) kept their original charge of guarding dimensional gates, standing stones, cairns, bridges, and underground passages. But now they exacted a large toll, often to be paid in gold, but more often in human flesh.

No matter their origins, the Goblins are the other half of **boogey-man** legend. They are the trolls under the bridge, waiting to exact their toll. They are the guardians of the caves leading to the underworld. They are those who reside in Domhain Dorcha. They are amphibians, in a way — creatures born of both the Dreamstream and the material world — who straddle two realities, so therefore it is logical that they were given the charge to guard passages from one place to another, whether it



be the **Mirrorwall** or a bridge over a river. It is those places between the places in which the Goblins are most at home.

Over the centuries, as the Earth's magic energies waned, many of the Goblins left, fleeing to the Nightlands or staying in **Domhain Dorcha**. The tales of trolls hiding under bridges, of semi-human creatures haunting the fairy mounds and cairns, became nothing more than legends.

The Goblins have haunted man for centuries, followed him into his cities, and adapted their old way of life to the modern world. In addition to their home in **Domhain Dorcha**, there are also a few small groups found in large cities, living in sewers and abandoned slums.

The Goblins have a weakness for shiny stuff, almost to the point of obsession. It's not because of how much money it's worth (although the Goblin usually has a fair idea of each item's market value), but just because the shiny things look pretty. They tend to be greedy little buggers, too. Often a Goblin can be bribed into going away just by offering him a few coins — the problem lies in when he comes back wanting more, and then more, and so on.

Goblins also tend to be something of pack-rats, hanging onto junk that most people would consider to be worthless. This includes broken toys, tin cans, candy, paper scraps, pencil stubs, and about anything else you can think of. Most Goblins don't trust anyone with their "treasure", and try to keep their trinkets close to them, carrying the junk around everywhere. This results in the rather comical image of Goblins wearing large,

many-pocketed coats stuffed to the gills with (for lack of a better word) junk. The alternative is the Goblin having a large backpack or duffel bag, similarly overflowing. The bizarre thing is that no matter how much stuff they have in their pockets (or backpack, duffel bag, whatever), it doesn't clink together or make any noise unless the Goblin consciously allows it to! Probably some strange manifestation of their Faerie powers, this allows the Goblins to prowl silently around even with their pockets or backpacks full of stuff.

Now, the Goblins of **Domhain Dorcha**, under their chief, **Sputum**, have allied themselves with the King of Nightmares, the **Boogey-Man**, and are readying themselves to declare war on the material world. These horrid little monsters have even dared to challenge the **Nightlords!** They intend to control the world via its dreams and **nightmaress**, no longer allowing themselves to be left to myth and legend. Since the **Nightlords** have little direct influence over the **Dreamstream**, the **Boogey-Man** thinks it to be their **Achilles Heel**. Little does he know...

Goblin R.C.C.

Optional Player Race

The Goblins of **Domhain Dorcha** can be found not only in the **Dreamstream**, but also on Earth and in the **Nightlands**, usually lurking in places like caves, sewers, under bridges, and similar places (they love hiding in cities, right under humans' noses, because there are a lot of children to scare and neat trinkets to steal).

Goblins can be an optional player race, but note that a player character will usually be a rogue, as most Goblins are evil.

Basic stats are the same as the Goblin race in **Palladium Fantasy RPG** or **Rifts Conversion Book 1**, with the following exceptions:

P.P.E.: 1D4X10 P.P.E. +1D6 per level of experience. They use this innate energy to fuel their limited dream and dimensional shift talents.

Special Abilities: In addition to those mentioned in the book:

1. Dreamdance: All Goblins have the psionic ability to enter the **Dreamstream**, the same as the psychic ability **Dreamdance: Superior** (Between the Shadows, p. 113), except that the power is fueled by P.P.E. instead of I.S.P. (same cost).

2. Mirror Walk: Same as the **Nightbane** power, but costs 10 P.P.E. and the Goblin can only carry 50 lbs. (22.5 kg) of material/equipment.

3. Fey Stealth: As detailed above, objects in the Goblin's pockets (or backpack, duffel bag, whatever) do not clink together or make any noise unless the Goblin consciously allows them to! Probably some strange manifestation of their Faerie powers, this allows the Goblins to prowl silently around even with their pockets or backpacks full of stuff. This does not add a bonus to their prowl skill, just makes it possible to prowl normally even when heavily burdened. This power can also be applied (optionally) to articles such as body armor, negating any prowl penalties from such. Use of this ability is automatic and does not cost any P.P.E.

4. Fey Banes: The Goblins have their roots in the Fair Folk; as such, they are vulnerable to such Fey banes as salt (Goblins can't cross a line of salt, and throwing it on them causes severe itching) and cold iron (iron filings act as acid on a Goblin, and

all pure (75% pure) iron weapons do damage direct to the Goblin's Hit Points (normal damage, not doubled).

The Goblins' major weakness is like that of the Children: sunlight will bring an end to their existence. When a Goblin is caught in sunlight (not Globe of Daylight), it will immediately turn to stone, permanently. Only a **stone-to-flesh** spell can release it from this; if the Goblin-statue is destroyed, the Goblin is killed (no chance of resurrection).

5. Other Bonuses: +1 to save vs. dream manipulation, +1 to save vs. magic. The Goblin gains an additional +1 to save against dream manipulation at each odd-numbered level of experience (3, 5, and so on).

Cobbler Goblins (who still keep their Fey heritage) also exist, and are slightly more common than in other worlds (perhaps 1 in 10 Goblins). Also, Cobbler Goblins can elect to become Dream Dancers or Dream Makers, gaining all the abilities of one of those P.C.C.s instead of the traditional Cobbler powers.

R.C.C. Skills: Either use the skill packages listed under the Nightbane R.C.C. (with an emphasis on skills related to sneaking around and stealing), or choose an O.C.C. available to them in **Palladium Fantasy RPG 2nd Edition** (with only a few modern skills).

Equipment: Pretty minimal; a couple of weapons (the Goblins prefer knives and straight razors), some clothes made out of rags, stolen, or scrounged out of a garbage can (shoes optional). The character also has a large coat with many pockets, or a duffel bag or backpack to carry his stuff in. The Goblin also has several pretty trinkets, such as coins, jewelry, etc., and many more "junk" items (use your imagination — it can be stuff that's going to turn out to be useful someday). Starts with about 1D4x10 dollars, half of that in change.

Experience Table: Uses the Sorcerer experience table (see Nightbane RPG).

The Children

"We're the monsters under your bed, the boogey-men in your closet. We're the ones who move your things from where you left them, steal the remote and hide it in the couch cushions — I love doing that. We're your nightmares, kid."

— Virgil, one of the Children of Domhain Dorcha

Believe it or not, all of the Children were once human. They were born as humans are, of mortal coil (without the mysterious origins of the Nightbane), and became seduced into the shadows. Most like living in the shadows, popping up in people's homes to play not-so-friendly pranks, such as frightening children by making subtle noises, clanking chains, moving around in the corners of a darkened room, and even making the occasional direct appearance (letting the child see them and start screaming, then dive back under the bed). They also occasionally venture into sleepers' Dream Pools, causing nightmares and slowly eroding their peace of mind.

Most of the Children are pawns of the Boogey-Man, drawn into his lust for dominating people's dreams. They follow his orders out of fear of him, rather than any loyalty or love for the Nightmare King. It is under his guidance that the Children comb the world, causing people to lose sleep and worry about what may or may not be happening while they sleep. Only the

Narcelesti faction (see below) remain relatively free from the Boogey-Man's control (and even then, only relatively).

Without exception, the Children all began life as humans. They were drawn into the **Under-Realm**, and stayed there through the night, whether by choice or by force. It was with the dawn of the new morning that the lost soul began to transform into something no longer fully human, a twisted shape out of man's dreams and nightmares.

Once a Child is born, he will invariably discover their greatest weakness — light. Any bright light (normal lighting) will cause one of the Children to shrink, disappearing inside of their clothes to protect themselves. They will be trapped, barely able to move (can shuffle along at a Spd. of 2; cannot use any skills or other abilities), until the lights are dimmed. This is also, interestingly enough, a great way to hide, as nobody will think a pile of laundry is really some **boogey-man** in disguise. This, unfortunately, also means that sunlight will kill the Children of Domhain Dorcha!

The Children are, for the most part, pranksters, enjoying their powers and nocturnal life. Most of them chose their fate, out of a desire to escape their lives, out of mischief, or other reasons. The few that didn't were trapped by accident; most of these loathe their very existence and would do anything to be human again.



The Children of Domhain

Dorcha R.C.C.

Optional Player Race

Note: The Children of Domhain Dorcha can be player characters, but, like vampires, are limited to nightly excursions. During the daytime, the character is confined to the **Under-Realm** (and the rest of the **Dreamstream**).

Common Alignments: Most (94%) of the Children are **Unprincipled**, Anarchist, and Miscreant — for the most part, they are only out to have fun at someone else's expense. A few genuinely enjoy causing trouble for people, and even outright torture; these generally fall into the Diabolic alignment. Scrupulous Children can exist (5%), and will probably be members of the Narcelesti faction. Highly honorable (Principled and Aberrant) Children are rare in the extreme; less than 1%.

Attributes: Normal human; all 3D6, plus any possible bonuses from appearance (see below). Only humans (not **supernaturals**) are affected by the Under-Realm.

Hit Points/S.D.C.: Same as human, plus any possible bonuses from appearance (see below).

P.P.E.: 1D4X10 P.P.E. +1D6 per level of experience. They use this innate energy to fuel their limited dream talents. The Children can also augment this somewhat by draining small amounts of P.P.E. from sleepers (see below).

R.C.C. Abilities:

1. Monstrous Appearance: Once a person begins to become one of the Children of Domhain Dorcha, he gains a new, twisted appearance, usually influenced by his subconscious (much in the same way as the Nightbane themselves). Roll on the Nightbane **Morphus** tables, or choose the characteristics you want. The character does not get any of the other Nightbane R.C.C. powers or abilities, just the appearance and bonuses/abilities associated with it, nor can they learn Nightbane talents. Also note that this change is permanent; the Children do not have a Facade form.

2. Dream Travel: All Children have the psionic ability to enter the Dreamstream, the same as the psychic ability Dreamdance: Superior (Between the Shadows, p. 113), except that the power is fueled by P.P.E. instead of I.S.P. (same cost).

3. Nightvision: All of the Children of the Under-Realm have **nightvision** to a range of 1000 feet (305 m; plus possible appearance bonuses).

4. Supernatural Lifespan: The Children's lifespan is greatly increased; on average, they live about 500 years.

5. Other Bonuses: +1 to save vs. dream manipulation, +1 to save vs. magic. The character also gains an additional +1 to save against dream manipulation at each odd-numbered level of experience (3, 5, and so on).

6. Vulnerability to Light: The Children's greatest weakness is to light. They can only endure half normal lighting; turning on a lamp nearby will cause the half-human creatures to shrink into their clothes and have to remain there, unable to move, until the light is turned off (they don't take any damage; they're just trapped there). Sunlight inflicts 2D6 damage to the Child per melee round, (note that they are trapped inside their clothes while this is happening) and the Globe of Daylight spell inflicts 1D6 damage per minute (too weak to do more). Fire and light

expulsion attacks (i.e., Guardians and lasers) do double damage to the Children and may (50% chance) cause them to retract into their clothes. Darkness-based attacks (i.e., Shadow Bolt) and even hand-to-hand attacks from creatures like Shadow Beasts, do half damage.

7. Other Abilities: Children of Domhain Dorcha, after many years of living in the Under-Realm, often develop unique special abilities. Most common of these seems to be developing the abilities of the Dream Maker or Dream Dancer P.C.C.s, although many strange abilities are possible. Also note that Children of Domhain Dorcha retain any psionic or magic abilities and spells, including P.C.C. and O.C.C. special abilities, that they had as humans. If their previous O.C.C. or P.C.C. had a high amount of P.P.E., do not add that to the character's P.P.E. Use either their previous number or the one from this R.C.C., whichever is higher. If the character gains P.P.E. as he/she increases in levels, use either the old addition or the one given above (again, whichever is higher).

R.C.C. Skills: Same skill packages as Nightbane R.C.C.; however, most will have very minimal skills (high school equivalent). Can also elect to be of a magic O.C.C. or P.C.C., but at half "Related" skills.

Money: Usually has about 1d4X10 dollars; money doesn't mean much to them, except as pretty trinkets.

Equipment/Other Stuff: Again, stuff is pretty meaningless to a nocturnal prankster. Assume typical kids'/teenage stuff.

Experience Table: Uses the Nightbane experience table.

The Boogey-Man

King of Nightmares

The King of Domhain Dorcha and leader of the Goblins and most of the Children is the Boogey-Man, who rules this part of the Dreamstream with an iron fist. It is his greatest pleasure to exert his power over someone else — he is a true sadist, torturing others without end.

As to where the Boogey-Man came from... let me tell you a story. It begins many, many years ago, in the London of Charles Dickens' time. There was once a young boy called **Darian Bly**. Nobody knew where his parents came from; all he knew was the inside of a steel mill. The urchin grew up forced into a life of slave labor — his life could have been the basis for *Oliver Twist*.

All his life, young Darian endured many hardships and abuse — mental, physical, and even sexual — at the hands of both his adult overseers (one in particular known as Hard-Hand Ben) and older children. As he lived through the pain, degraded, beaten, and humiliated, he realized that in life you were either one of the givers or one of the takers. You either made someone's life a living hell or your life would be one. One thought stuck in **Darian's** mind: to become strong, to become one of those who were in control.

One night, as he lay huddled in a corner away from the other child slaves, Darian heard a noise from the nearby shadows. A small scuffling. Just a rat, he thought, and rose to chase it away so it could not bite them in their sleep. Instead, a clawed hand reached from the shadows and dragged Darian Bly into the Under-Realm.



The creature that grabbed him went by the name of Aaron the Sluagh. Aaron was one of the first Children, those seduced into the **Dreamstream**. The Sluagh lived only to inflict terror on others, stealing children from their prams and hauling them away to his private playrooms. The sleazy predator had wanted a true child, however, one to choose to follow his own twisted ways. And so a flesh peddler's training began with young **Darian**.

Aaron the Sluagh taught Darian **Bly** the ways of skulking in the shadows, of entering people's dreams and causing them to have nightmares that would push them over the brink of sanity, of even hunting children for the taste of their sweet flesh and terror. Darian learned all that and **more**, because the Sluagh was a hard teacher. He often even took to abusing his own student to drive a point home or just for the hell of it; the Sluagh even chained Darian up while he slept to prevent his escape.

It was after several years of degradation at the hands of Aaron the Sluagh that the young boy (by then **16**) decided to become one of the strong. He picked the lock on his chains and then killed his master while the Sluagh slept. It was at that moment that the Boogey-Man was born, a living nightmare born of a child's abuse.

The Boogey-Man has spent centuries refining the art of driving people insane, of preying on them while they sleep. He has built his kingdom in Domhain Dorcha through treachery and sheer meanness. His alliance with the Goblins early on increased his influence, and most of the Children have been swayed to his side. And **now**, with the coming of the war against the Nightlords and the rise of mystic energies, he has seen his chance to exert his will over even more people.

Exerting his will over other people... yes, that is his one true joy. The Boogey-Man is a classic case of a child abuse sufferer to the extreme. He loves inflicting pain on others, both by degrading them emotionally and physically hurting them. To him, control over another is to control what they feel and when they feel it. Torture is the ultimate release, for only then are your emotions poured out as another experiences agony.

Real Name: Darian Bly

Alignment: Diabolic with leanings toward Anarchist (occasionally has mercy on someone for no reason — really some subconscious remnant of the child he used to be).

Height: 5 feet 11 inches (1.8 m)

Weight: 170 lbs (76.5 kg)

Species/Race: Special; he used to be human, but has evolved into something more due to living in the **Under-Realm** too long.

O.C.C.: 10th level Child of Domhain Dorcha

Attributes: I.Q.: 14, M.E.: 23, M.A.: 24 (80% likely to intimidate), P.S.: 26, P.P.: 19, P.E.: 19, P.B.: 6, Spd: 18. Physical attributes are considered Supernatural.

Hit Points: 50

S.D.C.: 200

Horror Factor: 12; 16 to **children/innocents** who realize who/what he is.

Natural Abilities:

1. Dream Travel: The Boogey-Man, like all Children, has the psionic ability to enter the Dreamstream, the same as the psychic ability Dreamdance: Superior (Between the Shadows, p. 113), except that the power is fueled by P.P.E. instead of I.S.P. (same cost).

2. Dreamkill: The Boogey-Man has refined the art of killing someone through their dreams to a science. He will usually pop into the person's dreams and give them severe nightmares for several nights before finally killing them. Fundamentally the same as the Dream Maker power (Between the Shadows, p. 94).

3. Dream Manipulation, Create Dream Objects, and Increase Attributes (in Dreamstream): Again, the same as the Dream Maker powers (Between the Shadows, p. 93-94).

4. Empathic Trigger: Fundamentally a stronger version of the Empathic Transmission psionic power, except that the Boogey-Man can cause the subject to feel any emotion he wills (usually hopelessness, fear, or despair) by dredging up an appropriate memory. Range is limited to touch and only works on one target at a time. Takes 1D4 melees of concentration and 15 I.S.P. The subject must make a save at -4. If the victim fails to save, they will most likely be overcome by fear, and will be unable to take any actions for 1D4 melees. They will also be at -2 to strike, parry, and dodge, and -20% to all skills for 1D6 minutes after that time (shaken up, nervous, and very fearful). Victims of this power will also have a -2 to save against **Bly's** Horror Factor for that time. The victim may (60% chance) develop a temporary phobia lasting 1D6 weeks of something related to the Boogey-Man (a childish fear of the dark, fear of meat hooks and similar objects, etc.). This is a very nasty, sadistic, and emotionally debilitating power, and is likely to cause permanent insanity if it is used on someone repeatedly.

5. Force Portal: The Boogey-Man is able to "force" open any portal into Domhain Dorcha, even in the daytime. Often used for kidnappings, this power allows him and his minions to enter the physical world at any time they wish to. This power can also be used to open a dream window to anywhere in the Dreamstream, similar to the Dream Maker power. Costs 60 I.S.P. or P.P.E. (either one, or any combination). Bly can force open any portal that he knows well and has used several times, no matter what distance away it is. To force open a portal he hasn't passed through before, Bly must be standing **near/below** it.

6. Healing Factor: The Boogey-Man can regenerate 1D6 hit points/S.D.C. per hour.

7. Vulnerability to Light: The Boogey-Man's (like all Children's) greatest weakness is to light. He can only endure half normal lighting; turning on a lamp nearby will cause the half-human creature to shrink into his clothes and have to remain there, unable to move, until the light is turned off (he doesn't take any damage; he's just trapped there). Sunlight inflicts 2D6 damage per melee, (note that he is trapped inside his clothes while this is happening) and the Globe of Daylight spell inflicts 1D6 damage per minute (too weak to do more). Fire and light expulsion attacks (i.e., Guardians and lasers) do double damage to the Boogey-Man and may (50% chance) cause him to retract into his clothes. Darkness-based attacks (i.e., Shadow Bolt) and even hand-to-hand attacks from creatures like Shadow Beasts, do half damage.

P.P.E.: 125

I.S.P.: 125

Psionics: The Boogey-Man has the conventional psionic powers of empathy, telepathy, telekinesis, resist fatigue, astral projection, see aura, mind block auto-defense, and block breaker.

Magic: None per se; some of his natural abilities are probably magic in nature.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Expert (10th level); 5 attacks per melee.

Bonuses: +3 on perception, +3 to roll with punch or fall, +3 to save vs. dream manipulation, in addition to attribute and skill bonuses.

Skills of Note:

Lore: Dreamstream 98%

Streetwise 80%

Pick Locks 80%

Escape Artist 80%

W.P. Automatic Pistol

W.P. Meat Hook (treat as W.P. Knife)

Description/Disposition: An ugly, misshapen, hunchbacked and one-eyed troll, the Boogey-Man lurks in the darkness of the **Under-Realm**, ready to jump out to scare or grab some innocent and drag them into Domhain Dorcha. He is usually clad in black jeans, motorcycle boots, and a black leather jacket, although he occasionally will pass himself off as a clown to lure in potential victims — the Boogey-Man is a creature of the world and easily adapts himself to modern times. His face is that of a half-starved, maniacal child, with long, pointed teeth, gaunt cheeks, and a desperate, hungry eye. His hands are scabbed, calloused, and bloody, and have long talons for fingernails. In his right hand, he holds an old, rusty, bloody meat hook. An assortment of torture devices are strung out on his belt. He revels in torture and sadism. He combines the powers of a Dream Maker, the sadism of a rapist, and the black heart of someone who endured too much child abuse and has turned that hatred outwards.

Weapons/Equipment: He has a few durable set of chains and manacles, an assortment of quality whips and black jacks, a **taser**, gags, and a strong stock with locks and hooks (I'm not going to mention the high quality of other items that he has, leaving them up to your own incredibly warped imaginations). He always carries his trusty meat hook, a dull, rusty weapon used more for its intimidation value (2D6 damage, plus a 50% chance of a wound caused by it getting infected and turning gangrenous). Other than that, he usually is armed only with an antique .45 revolver.

The Narcelesti

"Under an orange Harvest Moon,

Children shall be born in the Realm Underneath,

Cursed Children of the Under-Mountain"

— ancient Celtic chant

The Narcelesti faction are maybe what the Dream-Children were meant to be. They are the philosophical descendants of the first explorers to cross over to the Under-Realm. They are much like the Dream Riders (see *Between the Shadows*) in that they mostly like to simply ride the wake of the Dreamstream, seeing which way it flows, rarely intervening in dreamers' lives.

Back in the days when magic energy on Earth ran higher, sorcerers and mystics from ancient Rome began exploring the Dreamstream, and in it, they discovered what the Celts called the **Otherworld**. How they became the first Children of Domhain Dorcha is unclear — whether by some natural prop-

erty of this part of the Dreamstream, or a dark sorcery that warped the Under-Realm, is not known. This small group of dream travelers became known as the Narcelesti, the Celestial Sleepers. Their traditions of protection and nurturing have been passed on by those few Children who wish to protect others from what the Under-Realm has created.

As for the section of the Dreamstream known as Domhain Dorcha, the Narcelesti consider it to be their homeland — a birthing place where they can accomplish what good they can with their cursed existence. Most of the members of the Narcelesti are Children who became trapped in Domhain Dorcha against their will, triggering their painful metamorphosis. They are the few who have rejected the temptations of supernatural abilities, those who have pure hearts, strong wills, and the drive to protect normal humans from the dangers of the Under-Realm.

The Narcelesti are the ones who help lost children out of the Under-Realm before morning, the ones who intervene in people's dreams when the Boogey-Man comes calling, and the ones who keep the Goblins from exacting their tolls. For centuries, the Narcelesti have been the watchmen of the dream-world.

The Narcelesti have traditionally confined themselves to Domhain Dorcha, not even trying to enforce their laws in the rest of the Dreamstream (aside from following the Boogey-Man's minions and the Goblins there). These Children realize how impossible it would be to stop every evil in the whole Dreamstream, and limit themselves to what they feel they can handle. They are old friends of the Order of Morpheus and are on good terms with the Dream Riders. Most Dream Riders consider the Narcelesti to be a good enough sort, but mostly too strict and bent on their rules. This is, of course, not always true, and is probably due to the **Narcelesti's** leader Marathon's own attitudes.

The Narcelesti have been, for the most part, a more disciplined and organized faction than the other groups that roam the Dreamstream. Part of this is because their primary domain is the Under-Realm, which is more stable than other parts, and allows for this "grounding" in reality. They are scattered throughout Domhain Dorcha in groups of three or four, each doing what they can in their assigned area (such as it is, considering the crazy geography of the Under-Realm), and able to call on the rest of the Sleepers if a problem is too big for them to handle.

Also, the Celestial Sleepers have had a long tradition of resisting the natural urges most Children have — pranks and other selfish behavior (what Marathon would cite as abuse of the Dreaming). They have been restrained, even to the point of aloofness, to try to prevent the temptations of their powers. Interestingly enough, several of the Children who have "passed through" in the past 50 years or so, while joining the Narcelesti, also idolize Old Jack and his trickster ways. Marathon quietly disapproves of this attitude, but does not mention it much for fear of driving off new members. (These younger Children are probably the most likely to be player characters.)

Unfortunately, the Narcelesti have always been the minority. The temptations of walking in the shadows are many, and most Children only see what they can gain for themselves — pleasure, power, inflicting pain on their enemies from the mortal world. It is this the Boogey-Man preys on, coercing Children and Goblins to his side with promises of making them

dream-lords. Over the centuries, he has bribed, bullied, and terrorized Domhain Dorcha's inhabitants into becoming his army. After Dark, the Narcelesti remain second in power to the Boogey-Man and his allies. The Narcelesti now remain free of the Boogey-Man's bullying and coercing only through the strength of Marathon, the Dream-Mother. If she were slain or incapacitated, the Narcelesti would be sure to fall.

NPCs

Jack of the Whills

Jack of the Whills, or "Old Jack", as he is commonly known, is the arch-enemy of the Boogey-Man. He's been around in the **Under-Realm** for even longer than the Boogey-Man himself. Old Jack is the eternal trickster; for centuries, tales of his exploits have been told in **Appalachia**. Legend even has it that he's conned the Devil himself a couple of times!

The dream-dweller now known as Jack of the Whills had his beginnings in America in the 1600's. He was one of the first children born to settlers west of the Appalachian mountains. He grew up there, a hard and simple life on the frontier. As a boy, Jack discovered that he had a knack for trickery. He wasn't mean about it, no, but the boy could still find a way to end up conniving his way out of messes. Not that he was lazy; he just preferred to use his brains whenever he could.

One day, old Jack was out wandering around (somewhere in what is now southwestern Virginia), as he liked to do. It was getting dark, and he was pretty far from home, so he thought he'd find a place to set in for the night. There happened to be some caves nearby that he knew of, so he settled on there.

Then, Jack heard voices in the back of the cave — grim and gravelly voices. At first, Jack thought they were bandits or the like, hiding out, or maybe somebody who needed shelter for the night, like himself. They weren't.

It was then that Jack had his first encounter with the Goblins. **They** had been set to guard these caves, as they were one of the mystic passages into the Under-Realm. They started a fight with Old Jack, and for a few minutes he thought he was in trouble.

Mostly, it was luck that saved him. See, Jack had in his pocket a lump of salt he was bringing home. He'd found it on the way to the caves; just happened to notice it. Jack now thinks it might've been the hand of God or something similar that put that just where he'd find it when he needed it.

That lump of salt proved just enough to scare the Goblins off. The little trolls ran away, to the back of the cave. Jack, not sure of who or what he'd seen, ran after them. By the dim light from the cave's mouth, Jack saw the Goblins actually pass through the back wall, even though it was solid stone. Jack grabbed onto the heel of the last Goblin as it passed through, and he was pulled into Domhain Dorcha too.

Jack found himself in a place where tricksters were the rule, and he knew he'd found his home. He spent centuries popping up at night to join some traveler at his **campfire**, then stealing

some of his goods, or climbing out from under some kid's bed to give him a good laugh and a scare.

It was over these centuries that Old Jack would build up some enemies. He never was malicious enough to join Aaron the **Sluagh** in his nocturnal **terrorization**, or Aaron's heir, the Boogey-Man, later. Instead, he stuck (and still sticks) to mostly good-natured pranks, leaving the really vindictive stuff (i.e., scaring someone to death) for people who deserve it. This has earned Jack the enmity of the Boogey-Man.

There have also been some rumors that Old Jack once played cards with an Avatar of the **Nightlord** that rules the southern United States. And, what's even stranger, rumor has it that Jack won, resulting in that Nightlord having to keep his Avatars from entering the Dreamstream! (Nobody knows if this is true or not; after all, Jack is something of a braggart.)

Tales of Old Jack would survive for centuries after he passed into Domhain Dorcha. He became a mythic figure, a David against the Goliaths of urbanization and corruption. Stories of his exploits have been passed down from generation to generation, told by bards and storytellers as the "Jack Tales." They would even inspire authors like Faulkner and Clemens, becoming part of newer fictional tricksters like **Flem Snopes** and Tom Sawyer.

Now, after the coming of the Night, Jack has become something of a recluse, staying hidden somewhere in Domhain Dorcha, hunted by the minions of the Boogey-Man. Jack's main problem is that he's naturally flamboyant; he has a hard time staying out of the spotlight. He just can't resist an opportunity to show off, a habit that's nearly gotten him caught many times.

As for the war against the Nightlords in the mortal world, Old Jack isn't quite sure what he wants to do yet. He knows of the Nightlords in a general way, and knows that they must be stopped. The Boogey-Man's recent ideas about dominating people through their dreams sicken and revile Jack. He'd love to put an end to any schemes **Bly** and the Goblins are up to.

Real Name: John Whills

Aliases: Jack of the Whills, Old Jack

Alignment: Unprincipled

Height: 6 feet 4 inches (1.93 m)

Weight: 170lbs (76.5 kg)

Species/Race: Special; he used to be human, but has evolved into something more due to living in the Under-Realm too long.

O.C.C./P.C.C.: 12th level Vagabond/Farmer/Dream Maker

Attributes: I.Q.: 23, M.E.: 18, M.A.: 20, P.S.: 16, P.P.: 24, P.E.: 14, P.B.: 12, Spd: 19. Physical attributes are considered Supernatural.

Hit Points: 50

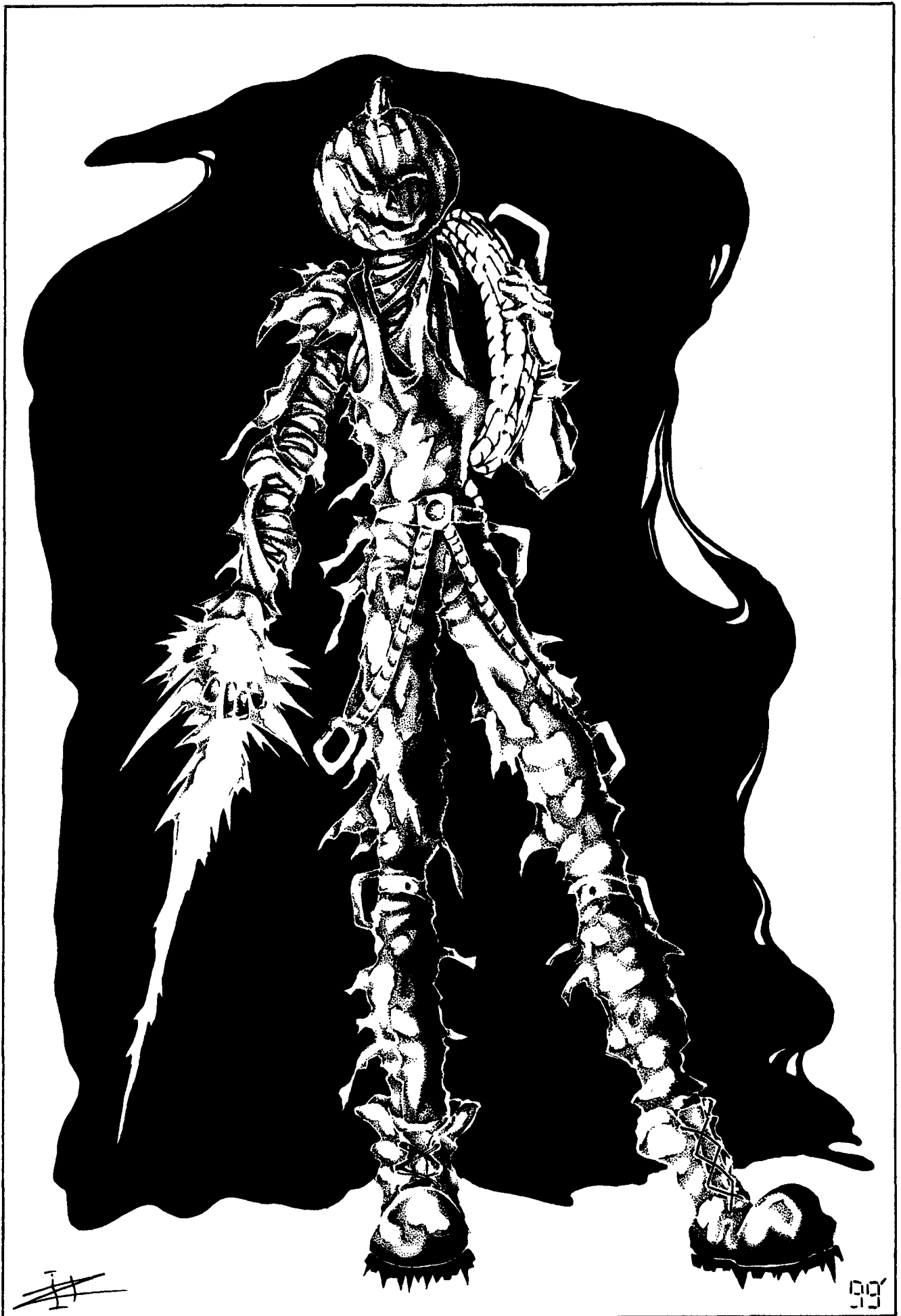
S.D.C.: 190

Horror Factor: 11

Natural Abilities:

1. Dream Travel: Jack of the Whills, like all Children, has the psionic ability to enter the Dreamstream, the same as the psychic ability Dreamdance: Superior (Between the Shadows, p. 113), except that the power is fueled by P.P.E. instead of I.S.P. (same cost).

2. Dream Manipulation, Create Dream Objects, and Increase Attributes (in Dreamstream): Same as the Dream Maker powers (Between the Shadows, p. 93-94). Jack does not



know how to perform a Dream-kill, and will never seek to learn how.

3. Nightvision: 2000 feet (610 m; double that if a candle is placed inside his head; see appearance, below).

4. Control of Random Events: Jack has the unique psionic ability to control random events. This is a fairly difficult ability to use, and its effects are usually minor. Things like dice rolls, card shuffling, etc., fall into a pattern that Jack wants them to (if the ability works, that is). Jack must concentrate (counts as 1 melee **action/attack**, as usual) and expend 5 I.S.P. or P.P.E. (or higher for bigger things — G.M.'s discretion), while thinking of the desired effects. The object being affected must save vs. psionic attack (15 or higher) or be bent to Jack's will.

Example: Jack is playing cards with Gargoyle. It's Gargoyle's turn to shuffle the cards, and Jack wants to get some good cards this time, so he concentrates (while Gargoyle is shuffling) and spends 5 I.S.P. The deck of cards gets a chance to save and fails. Jack ends up getting a full house, and wins the hand.

For bigger random events (like some stroke of luck saving his life), the object or person being affected will have anywhere from a +1 to a +6 to save vs. this ability and will at least triple the I.S.P. cost. Living beings (people) automatically have a +3 to save vs. this ability. Note that the effects of this ability are always minor.

5. Healing Factor: Old Jack can regenerate 2D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per hour.

6. Vulnerability to Light: Jack's (like all Children's) greatest weakness is to light. He can only endure half normal lighting; turning on a lamp nearby will cause the half-human creature to shrink into his clothes and have to remain there, unable to move, until the light is turned off (he doesn't take any damage; he's just trapped there). Sunlight inflicts 2D6 damage per melee, (note that he is trapped inside his clothes while this is happening) and the Globe of Daylight spell inflicts 1D6 damage per minute (too weak to do more). Fire and light expulsion attacks (i.e., Guardians and lasers) do double damage to Jack and may (50% chance) cause him to retract into his clothes. Darkness-based attacks (i.e., Shadow Bolt) and even hand-to-hand attacks from creatures like Shadow Beasts do half damage.

P.P.E.: 125

I.S.P.: 125

Psionics: Jack has the conventional psionic powers of empathy, telepathy, telekinesis, resist fatigue, deaden pain, astral transference, supercharge, see aura, mind block auto-defense, and psi-sword (all 12th level).

Magic: None per se; some of his natural abilities are probably magic in nature.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Expert (10th level); 5 attacks per melee.

Bonuses: +4 on perception, +2 to pull punch, +3 to save vs. dream manipulation, in addition to attribute and skill bonuses.

Skills of Note: Wilderness survival, dream lore, gambling, gambling: dirty tricks, **cardsharp**, escape artist, pick locks, pick pockets, prowl, all at 98%.

Description/Disposition: Old Jack appears to be a tall, lanky man, like a scarecrow covered in rags, usually the remnants of blue jeans and a work shirt. His head is a **jack-o-lantern**,

carved into a half-frightening, half-cheerful grin (His head is actually hollow and can be used for storage; if a candle is placed inside his head, it will double the range of his **nightvision**). He is the eternal trickster, always looking for a way to use his wit to get out of a situation. He tends to rely on his natural powers (see above) and brains rather than brute force. Jack, although he appears ragged, is flamboyant and yes, even arrogant. He tends to have an "I'm the greatest" attitude that will annoy some people and make others love him. He hates the Boogey-Man with a passion, citing the predator for perverting all that Domhain Dorcha and its Children are supposed to be. Of course, this doesn't make him a paladin — just someone who has seen an abominable monster enter his home and turn it into a place of nightmares.

Weapons/Equipment: Jack doesn't usually carry much in the way of gear; the only weapon he uses is his psi-sword (see psionics, above). As for equipment, he usually only has things like a pocket knife, a length of rope, and other basic mountain man-type gear. He really doesn't need or care for having much stuff. Usually only has 1D4X10 dollars on him at any given time.

Allies: Jack is on reasonably good terms with Marathon and the Narcelesti faction (although he won't necessarily outright join **them**), as well as a few Dreamer Nightbane. He is something of a hero to some of the younger Narcelesti, but outright tells them that he isn't a good role model for them. However, he does play this hero worship up by using his influence to convince these younger denizens to do things for him (and hates himself for manipulating them that way).

Enemies: The Boogey-Man and the Goblins of Domhain Dorcha are his most hated enemies. The Nightlords are also considered a threat, but a more distant one.

Marathon the Dream-Mother

Marathon the Dream-Mother has been the leader of the Narcelesti for longer than any (except maybe Jack of the **Whills**) can remember. She is quiet but strong; she has a way of making Children remember what it was like to be human, to re-think what they are doing.

Centuries ago, Marathon was one of the first of the Dream Dancers. In mortal life, she was a Gypsy, one of the Many-Gifted. She was blessed (some say cursed) with a natural sensitivity to the supernatural. Her clan wandered the Europe of the 1800s, traveling entertainers and healers. It was through these gypsy traditions, perhaps, that psychic abilities **began** to develop in the young woman who would become Marathon.

Eventually, the full range of Marathon's powers became known to her, and she entered the Dreaming. For her first few years, Marathon used her psychic abilities to enter people's subconscious minds and try to help them, to cure mental illnesses and aid them in fighting off nightmares.

Soon after, Marathon discovered the part of the **Dreamstream** known as Domhain Dorcha. Here, she saw a land of the perverted Gatekeepers (the Goblins) who had been twisted by the Darkness. Marathon came to the conclusion (right or not) that the **Under-Realm** was not inherently a place of evil, and crea-

tures such as the Goblins and evil Children shouldn't exist in this place.

It is true that Marathon is what is really keeping the Narcelesti together under the **Boogey-Man's** hammering. She is really the only one with the force of will to stand up to the Nightmare King's face — most of the other members of her faction are too scared of him.

Interestingly enough, Marathon's metamorphosis into one of the Children slightly altered her psyche. Instead of the forgiving Gypsy girl that first entered the **Dreamstream** so many centuries ago, Marathon has become rather hard-edged when dealing with other **supernaturals**. She is intolerant when it comes to dealing with evil Dream Makers, Goblins, and Children who would corrupt the Dreamstream (what she considers to be corrupting, anyway). The Boogey-Man is especially hated, as he preys upon the mortal world to the extreme. Marathon has adopted an "if you're not with us, then you're against us" attitude (some suggest that



this has something to do with Jack of the **Whills**, but there is no proof). Little does she know that a current enemy, Virgil (see below) could be key to the Nightmare King's downfall.

Real Name: unknown

Aliases: Marathon the Dream-Mother

Alignment: Principled

Height: 5 feet 5 inches (1.65 m)

Weight: 130lbs. (58.5 kg)

Species/Race: Used to be human, but has changed into something more.

O.C.C./R.C.C.: 8th level Children of Domhain **Dorcha/Dream Dancer**

Attributes: I.Q.: 15, M.E.: 18, M.A.: 10, P.S.: 13, P.P.: 15, P.E.: 12, P.B.: 18, Spd: 12. Physical attributes are considered to be Supernatural.

Hit Points: 42

S.D.C.: 18

Horror Factor: 15

Natural Abilities: As per the Children of Domhain Dorcha R.C.C. (see above), plus all of the abilities of the Dream Dancer P.C.C. (see *Between the Shadows*, p. 96).

P.P.E.: 42

I.S.P.: 101

Psionics: All the special powers of the Dream Dancer P.C.C. (see *Between the Shadows*, p. 96), plus the conventional psionic powers of clairvoyance, empathy, healing touch, mind block, astral projection, sense evil, psychic diagnosis, psychic surgery, astral navigation, and suppress fear.

Magic: None per se; some of her natural abilities are probably magic in nature.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Basic, three attacks per melee, +1 to strike, +2 to parry and dodge, +2 to roll with **punch/impact**. Punch does 3D4+2 damage (due to claws), +2 to perception, +7 to dream combat rolls.

Skills of Note: Speaks and is literate in Gypsy, Polish, Italian, and English, all at 98%, lore: Dreamstream 80%, lore: psychic 75%, lore: demons & monsters 80%, dance 70%, prowl 70%.

Appearance: An otherwise human figure, but with a third eye in the middle of her forehead, and bird-like talons instead of hands.

Allies: The Narcelesti faction are her closest allies, but she has some strange ties with Jack of the Whills (there are rumors that Marathon and Jack had a romance some centuries back, but neither of them will comment on the matter). She also has some friends among the Order of Morpheus, including several of that faction who wish to oppose the **Ba'al**.

Enemies: Primarily the Boogey-Man, although the Nightlords are also considered a threat (a somewhat more distant threat, but a threat). Also, anyone who would corrupt or use the Dreamstream as a whole is considered an enemy. Unlike most of the Narcelesti, Marathon wishes to extend their group's authority beyond the **Under-Realm** and into the rest of the Dreamstream.

Virgil

Traitor?

"The potential to abuse the ability to get into anybody's house is huge. Let's take advantage of it, shall we?"

— Virgil's motto

Virgil is the Boogey-Man's right-hand man... er, monster. He has been one of the Dream-Children for nearly a hundred years now, and has loved nearly every minute of it. He was dragged down into the **Under-Realm** by the Boogey-Man himself, intent on creating a prodigy, much like Aaron the Sluagh did with him. Virgil has never loved nor admired his master, instead just fearing him.

Virgil is **Bly's** eyes and ears in the **Dreamstream**. He is the one who has taken over the responsibility of finding potential victims for the Boogey-Man, a sort of nightmare hunting dog. He hears rumors, which he passes on to his master. He even does the occasional kidnaping, even though his specialty is nocturnal terrorizing (he doesn't have the stomach for real torture, just likes scaring people out of their wits).

Virgil is your classic miscreant on acid. He is at once hyperactive and fearful. Virgil's favorite antics include entering **someone's** dreams and popping up in places at random, terrorizing the dreamer with a loud "Boo!" He tends toward very Puck-ish tricks, very rarely killing his prey, but keeping them alive and scaring them out of their wits (Game Masters, use your imagination and come up with the most twisted pranks you can think of).

The strange thing is, even with his immaturity and sadism, Virgil still comes off as being a kind of likeable guy. He may have a mean streak two feet wide, but he's still a good guy to hang out with — but not to be trusted. He's basically an eternal teenager.

Recently, though, Virgil has began thinking about what exactly he is doing by the Boogey-Man's side. He's also started thinking that it might be better if he struck out on his own. The only obstacle to that is (obviously) the Boogey-Man himself. So Virgil, who has often been the target of the Boogey-Man's anger and hard "training", has been considering what to do about it. A small voice in the back of his mind has been calling to him lately, like a child in the night. Virgil wonders if he might be going mad, as it tells him to resist his base impulses and to disobey his master. It whispers to him that he, too, was an innocent child once, who had the monsters pop out from underneath his bed. It also whispers to him that the Boogey-Man is bad and must be stopped from hurting other children.

Physically, Virgil is a short, adolescent-like figure with orange skin and rams' horns swept back from his forehead. His eyes, which are yellowish, have a frenzied, fearful look about them, as if he is constantly expecting to have to dodge a punch thrown at him. He favors black leather jackets with lots of zippers and shiny metal studs on them, and his favorite weapons are straight razors.

Virgil is also a natural shape-changer, able to alter his shape to (nearly) anything he wants; his only limitation is that he cannot make himself look completely human and can't impersonate anybody else. This ability doubles his usefulness as a spy for the Boogey-Man. He also gains some minor abilities from his altered shapes (use **Nightbane Morphus** tables for appropriate shapes, abilities & bonuses, but remove any S.D.C. bonuses).

Recently, the Boogey-Man has become wary of his chosen heir, remembering what he himself did to his teacher. **Bly** has a slight fear that one day, if Virgil becomes twisted enough, the orange dweeb will try to overthrow him. Most of it is because of the Boogey-Man's innate hatred for himself being dominated

and paranoia of anything threatening his control of his life and Domhain Dorcha. The rest of it comes because, yes, Virgil might one day (or might already) have those urges in him, to become the strong one ruling the Under-Realm. This fear and paranoia have made the Boogey-Man suspicious of his servant's every motive, making it hard should Virgil ever decide to throw his fate in with those who want the Boogey-Man gone.

Real Name: Virgil (it's all he's ever gone by)

Alignment: Miscreant with leanings toward Anarchist.

Species/Race: Used to be human, but has changed into something more.

O.C.C./R.C.C.: 5th level Childe of Domhain Dorcha

Appearance: A short, adolescent guy with orange skin (a bizarre, pale orange) with rams' horns swept back from his forehead is his natural form. Can shape-shift to nearly any appearance.

Attributes: I.Q.: 11, M.E.: 10, M.A.: 18, P.S.: 11, P.P.: 18, P.E.: 12, P.B.: 12, Spd: 15. Physical attributes are considered to be Supernatural.

Hit Points: 30

S.D.C.: 13

Horror Factor: 12

Natural Abilities: As per the Children of Domhain Dorcha R.C.C. (see above).

P.P.E.: 52

I.S.P.: N/A

Psionics: None.

Magic: None per se; some of his natural abilities are probably magic in nature.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Basic, three attacks per melee, +3 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +2 to roll with **punch/impact**. +7 to dream combat rolls, +1 to save vs. magic. 50% likelihood to intimidate/trust. Also remember to add in any bonuses due to temporary appearance (no S.D.C. bonuses).

Skills of Note: Speaks English (but is illiterate), lore: Dreamstream 65%, lore: psychic 60%, prowl 70%

Allies: Currently, the Boogey-Man and his minions, the Goblins. However, this may change.

Enemies: Nearly everybody but the Boogey-Man and his friends(?). Several members of the Narcelesti (including Marathon) want Virgil dead for what he's done (helping the Boogey-Man). Should he turn on Bly, Virgil will become one of the most hated figures in the Dreamstream.

Sputum

Chief of the Goblins

"No longer we fear the humans. No longer the waking worlds scare us. Now, we are strong. No longer we be Gatekeepers, servants of the Light. Now our kind, the old kind, will rise above Man. The world's pretties will be ours, my brothers. Even the Ba 'al will learn that the Fey are not dead.

— *Sputum Cargos, Goblin Chieftain*

Sputum, as he is called, is the leader of the largest of the Goblin clans of the Under-Realm. It was he that brought the majority of these twisted Fey over to follow the Boogey-Man. Awed, coerced, and intimidated by Bly, Sputum has played on the innate greed of his folk to get them to join this dark conspiracy.





Sputum is something of a contradictory little troll. Among his own people, Sputum is confident, arrogant, supremely greedy, and commands the respect of other Goblins (largely due to his substantial stock of possessions). However, the second the Boogey-Man shows up, Sputum changes and becomes a flighty, scared, boot-licking lackey. Unlike Bly's other chief henchman, Virgil, the Goblin chief is utterly petrified of and totally loyal to the Nightmare King.

In private, Sputum dreams of one day singlehandedly restoring his people's greatness and the glory (and wealth) due to heirs of the Faerie. In his own mind, Sputum "knows" that one day he will hit it big, and have his own dream-palace and every trinket his twisted, dank little heart could desire. In reality, though, he doesn't actually do anything to further these dreams (except being a lackey for Bly, and that doesn't earn him much). He has the ear of his fellow Goblins, but truly doesn't realize that he could take advantage of that more than he does. As it is, all of the profits and control that the Goblins produce go directly to Bly himself.

And yet Sputum doesn't quite realize this. The Boogey-Man treats Sputum as his servant, abuses him, kicks him around, and the little Goblin always gets up and comes back for more, blithely dreaming his own dreams.

Real Name: Sputum Cargos

Alignment: Miscreant

Species/Race: Goblin

O.C.C./R.C.C.: 5th level Goblin

Appearance: A short, squat little Goblin, about three feet high, the perfect height for a doorstep or a footstool (or even a large paperweight), with grey-green skin and bulging, nervous eyes. He wears ripped clothes of indeterminate colors, pieced together from rags. On his back is a huge (military-style) duffle bag, crammed full of almost every nick-knack, piece of jewelry, novelty item, and wallet you can imagine.

Attributes: I.Q.: 10, M.E.: 7, M.A.: 12, P.S.: 11, P.P.: 20, P.E.: 12, P.B.: 8, Spd: 14. Physical attributes are considered to be Supernatural.

Hit Points: 30

S.D.C.: 23

Horror Factor: 10

Natural Abilities: As per Goblin R.C.C. (see above).

P.P.E.: 53

I.S.P.: N/A

Psionics: None.

Magic: None per se; some of his natural abilities are probably magic in nature.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Basic, three attacks per melee; +4 to strike, +5 to parry/dodge, +2 to roll/pull punch; +3 to save vs. dream manipulation, +1 to save vs. magic.

Skills of Note: Speaks English (but is illiterate), speaks Faerie (98%), lore: **Dreamstream** 65%, pick pockets 47%, pick locks 53%, concealment 38%, prowl 72%.

Weapons: Sputum has a small cache of handguns (a couple of .45's and a couple of revolvers, typically 2D6 or 3D6 damage), as well as several knives. He is somewhat better armed than your average Goblin.

Allies: Currently, the other Goblins and the Boogey-Man.

Enemies: The Narcelesti, Jack of the Whills (who hates Goblins in general), the Nightlords, and nearly everybody else.

A Children of Domhain Dorcha Hook, Line, and Sinker™

A Short Way to Morning

This adventure works best with a player group that is all or mostly humans.

Hook: A child related to one of the player characters (i.e., younger brother/sister, nephew/niece, friend) has been complaining about nightmares and monsters under the bed, in the closet, etc. for several weeks now, and the player characters may be getting suspicious that there's something more to this than just childhood fears. The characters are asked to spend the night at the child's house, or to have the child sleep at the character's place.

Line: All is quiet until about 9 p.m. Then, the player characters hear a scream from the kid's room. When they get there, they discover the child is gone — all the windows are locked, and there are no signs that anyone broke in. Eventually they figure out what's going on (perhaps Virgil is prowling around the room some more) — the child has been kidnaped by the Boogey-Man himself, and taken into the **Under-Realm**.

Sinker: The group must now go after their young friend, confront Bly on his own turf, and rescue the kid. The trick is, they only have until dawn. It's a race against the clock, as after 8-10 hours have elapsed after the kid entered Domhain Dorcha, he/she will be trapped and begin changing into one of the Children — as will the player characters themselves (the human ones, **anyway**)!

PALLADIUM

ROLE-PLAYING GAME[®]



THE DRAGON HUNTERS OF KREMAKRILON

Optional Character Class and Adventure for The
Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game™

By Jon Thompson

They are the oldest. Older than man. Older than the ancient Elves. Some even say, older than the gods. Yet, the time of glory for these beasts stands in its twilight. Their ancient realms and wellsprings of power have disappeared from around them,

and their numbers have dwindled to proportions closer and closer to possible extinction. Yet they are still powerful... and terrible.

Since the dawning of his age, man has feared the dragon. They are beasts of magic, strength, and powers wholly incomprehensible to him. And so, man has always regarded these magnificent creatures with a hateful eye. Out of this hate has been born a new weapon; the Dragon Hunter.

History

Like many great things, the clan of **Kremakrilon** was born originally of an act of passion. It started with Vermius Naxith, a devout acolyte of a dragon cult based in the northern Timiro Kingdom. The cult worshiped a Fire Dragon who called himself **Tremakrilon** — a title that means, in an ancient Elven dialect, "true master of magical power." For years, Vermius studied and worshiped in the service of the cult, spending his every moment and bit of energy in service to a lord that he thought was honorable, kind, and benevolent. Unfortunately for Vermius, and his fellow worshipers, Tremakrilon was not as he appeared. He was a selfish, conceited dragon with no sense of honor, who was merely hiding under the pretext of an honorable being for the sake of sheer amusement at watching all of the "pathetic" humans scramble about in his service.

One day, Tremakrilon's hoard was discovered and pilfered from by a thief. Unfortunately for the cult, it happened during a service which Tremakrilon was attending. When the dragon discovered that his treasures had been stolen (some of his favorite items) he took it out on the cult. It was their fault for distracting him, and they must be punished. Of course, the only suitable punishment for such "pitiful" creatures is death.

Tremakrilon exacted his punishment during a service. Just as the high priest was handing him the sacred chalice, the beast sealed off the chamber and roasted them all in flame. Vermius had been outside, along with a few of the other members. They listened in horror as their companions screamed in agony, before they fled, fearing for their lives. Some fled home, and were destroyed when Tremakrilon carried his rage out into the countryside, burning several nearby villages. Others, like Vermius, fled into the wilderness, wisely fearing the dragon's wrath.

Vermius vowed revenge, not just upon Tremakrilon, but upon all dragons. Tremakrilon would only be the first. He immediately began recruiting soldiers, magicians, knights — anyone who would fight with him to destroy the dragon. It was then that Vermius met **Gilkren**.

Gilkren is a Thunder Lizard in human disguise. His past is sorted and mysterious. Only one thing can be certain; he hates all other dragons. He found himself quite fortunate to run into Vermius. Here was the perfect pawn in his plot to hunt down and destroy dragon kind. It was through **Gilkren's** magic and manipulation that the newly formed band of Dragon Hunters was able to subdue and kill Tremakrilon, and it is through his manipulation (primarily of Vermius) that he controls them today.

After the battle, some of the hunters disbanded, content with their loot. Others had been listening to **Vermius'** preaching about the evils of dragons and chose to stick around. Vermius named them The Dragon Hunters of Kremakrilon - Kremakrilon being a word in the same ancient Elven dialect meaning "false master of magical power." And so they were born.

Current Outlook

Right now the clan is taking a break between killings to gather resources and lay out future plans. They have moved into a stronghold in the mountains between The Timiro Kingdom and The Old Kingdom, which Gilkren keeps well hidden with

his magic. Vermius is trying to have a decent library and armory put into it, as well as more suitable facilities. The rest of the clan has been off hiring recruits, who must be screened very carefully, as Gilkren will not let any information about the clan leak out. Indeed, secrecy is the greatest thing on his mind right now. Gilkren knows all too well what any nearby dragons would do if they found out a clan of Dragon Hunters had taken up residence nearby. The dragon spends most of his time in private, either studying his magic or plotting their next kill.

As far as resources go, the clan is boasting a pretty sizeable treasury on account of the hoards they have collected as booty (they have slain three dragons so far, including Tremakrilon). Vermius is trying to use this money to purchase the clan some real dragon hunting weapons.

Members

Right now membership is around thirty. The clan is actively seeking new members. They hope to one day boast a sizeable militia. Some important members are described here.

Vermius Naxith

He is the leader of the clan and is, as of now, the most skilled hunter. He is a man bent upon revenge, who is unshakeable in his beliefs. He spends his time honing his skills, training the men, and preaching his "wisdom."

Name: Vermius Naxith

Alignment: Principled

O.C.C. & Experience: 8th level Human Dragon Hunter

Age: 42

Sex: Male

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches (1.73 m)

Weight: 188 pounds (84.6 kg)

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.E. 14, M.A. 24, P.S. 17, P.P. 14, P.E. 15, Spd. 12

Hit Points: 51

S.D.C.: 27

P.P.E.: 101

Description: Vermius looks far younger than his age. He has shoulder-length, flowing blond hair, and his eyes are emerald-green and filled with passion. Regardless of his outfit, he always wears a dragon tooth necklace and other similar jewelry. Despite his somewhat wild appearance, he is extremely personable and mild-mannered.

Actions per Melee: 4, **Hand to Hand:** Martial Arts

Bonuses: +4 to Roll with **Punch/Fall/Impact**, +5 to Parry, +6 to Dodge, +2 to Strike, +2 to Damage, +2 to Initiative, +2 to Saving Throw versus Horror Factor, **Trust/Intimidate** 80%, Critical Strike on a Natural **18-20**, Karate Style Kick does 2D4 + P.S. bonus, Jump Kick, Leap Kick, Paired Weapons.

Combat Skills: W.P. Shield, W.P. Pole Arms, W.P. Sword, W.P. Blunt, W.P. Chain, W.P. Missile Weapons.

Skills of Note: Dragon Lore 90%, Tracking Dragons 85%, Detect Concealment & Traps 75%, Surveillance 75%, Climb/Scale Walls 95%, Prowl 80%, Language: Southern 98%, Language: **Elven** 95%, Wilderness Survival 85%, Public Speaking 85%, Intelligence 80%, Boxing, Literacy: Elven 80%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 65%, Lore: Magic 65/55/50%, Lore: Religion 70%.

Powers: Dragonlust, Dragontough, Eyes of the Dragon, Claws of the Dragon, Sense Dragon, Hide of the Dragon, Strength of the Dragon, Poison Breath, Breath of Ice.

Armor of Note: A suit of Full Plate with the following attributes: A.R.: 18, magically enhanced S.D.C.: 360.

Weapons of Note: Dragon Slayer War Hammer (2D6 S.D.C. versus normal opponents/1D6x10 S.D.C. versus dragons) with the following properties: Adds one additional attack per melee when fighting a dragon, regenerates 6D6 points of damage done by a dragon (only) three times per day, +2 to save versus the magic of a dragon (only).

Money: He has little money of his own, but has full access to the clan's treasury.

Gilkren

Gilkren is a fully grown adult Thunder Lizard in human disguise. None of the clan members even suspect his true identity. His age is somewhere between 2000-2500 years, and he is *extremely* powerful. Gilkren, like most dragons, has spend centuries buried in magical research and practice. He is not, however, a one-sided villain. He is currently torn between the beliefs of the group and his own selfish motives. Gilkren originally formed the clan with the intent of using it to steal the magical secrets of other dragons and to eliminate potential enemies. Now he is starting to be swept away by **Vermius'** teachings, believing that there is some true good in the murder of dragon kind. He still does not care for the members of the group,

though. He cares only for the cause and himself, between which he is torn. Gilkren is aware that he is the one imbuing the members with the magical powers they are gaining (see below), but he does *not* know where this power is coming from. He spends the majority of his time plotting the future kills of the group, many of the targets being past acquaintances of his.

Name: Gilkren

Race: Thunder Lizard Dragon

O.C.C.s & Experience: 20th Level Wizard, 15th Level Summoner

Alignment: Diabolic

Attributes: I.Q. 23, M.A. 25, M.E. 21, P.S. 29, P.P. 20, P.E. 21, P.B. 22, Spd. 42

Size: 20 feet (6.1 m) tall and 40 feet (12.2 m) long in true form, 5 feet, 8 inches (1.73 m) in human form.

Weight: 20 tons

Age: 2000-2,500 years

H.P.: 4000

S.D.C.: 2000

A.R.: 15

Horror Factor: 15

P.P.E.: 1600

I.S.P.: 500

Description: Gilkren appears as an enormous, magnificent blue dragon with blazing, golden horns in his true form. As a human he appears as a well-built, attractive man with dark hair and deep, blue eyes.



Actions per Melee: Seven physical attacks, or four breath attacks and three physical, or two by magic. He prefers to attack with magic.

Damage: A restrained punch does 2D6 S.D.C., a full strength punch does 4D6 S.D.C., and a power punch does 1D4x10 S.D.C. (counts as two attacks). The tail may be used to attack and does an additional +2D6 to damage. Strength is Supernatural.

Bonuses: +4 to Initiative, +6 to Strike, +6 to Dodge, +7 to Parry, +5 to Pull Punch, +4 to Roll with Impact, +6 to Saving Throw versus Horror Factor, +7 to Saving Throw versus Psionics, Magic, and Poison, +4 to all other Saving Throws, +14 to Damage, 84% **Trust/Intimidate**.

Natural Abilities: Night vision 100 feet (30.5 m), excellent color vision, see the invisible, turn invisible at will, bio-regenerate 1D4x10 S.D.C. per minute, resistant to fire and cold (does half damage, even magic fire and cold), metamorphosis at will, **teleport** self 88%, dimensional **teleport** 88%, as well as all other powers common to all true dragons.

Breath Weapon: Green fire breath, Range: 100 feet (30.5 m), six feet wide (1.8 m), Damage: 1D6 S.D.C. and paralysis (1D6 melees unless save versus magic 14 or higher) to all **mortals/humanoids**, 3D6 S.D.C. to all dragons and supernatural beings, 6D6 S.D.C. to all Elementals. The width of the blast enables him to strike several opponents (2-6) if they are huddled together.

Combat Skills: W.P. Sword, W.P. Staff, W.P. Shield, W.P. Missile Weapons, W.P. Chain, W.P. Blunt.

Skills of Note: Dragon Lore 98%, Literate in **Elven/Dragonese**, Southern, Eastern, and Western at 98%, Speaks **Elven/Dragonese**, Southern, Eastern, Western, Faerie Speak, and Gobblely at 98%, Disguise 98%, Imitate Voice & Impersonation 98%, Intelligence 98%, History 98%, Climb/Scale Walls 98%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 98%, Lore: Geomancy & Ley Lines 98%, Lore: Magic 98%, Advanced Math 98%.

Magic: All Wizard spells levels 1-15 as well as the spell Barrier of Thoth, all Circles of Protection, Summoning, and Power.

Psionics: Master psionic. Knows all Sensitive and Physical powers as well as Empathetic Transmission, Insert Memory, and Mind Block Auto-Defense.

Items of Note: He is likely to have as many as 2D4+2 lesser and 1D4 greater magical items on his person at any given time. His personal hoard is immense.

Other Notable Clan Members

Thirsius Therinian: Thirsius is the only original member of the dragon cult who chose to remain in the clan. He is a loyal friend to **Vermius**, but not to his cause. His interest in the group lies solely in gold. He has yet to have his friendship with **Vermius** called into question by his **greed**.

Samilif Smallhammer: He is an Ogre from The Old Kingdom that joined the group during the attack on **Tremakrilon**. He is gentle and very intelligent for his race, and he has a good heart. His exact reasons for joining the group are unknown.

Brattlefoot: **Brattlefoot** is a somewhat arrogant, yet more than foolish Wizard who joined the group during its original raid. He believes himself to be a very powerful and frightful Wizard, though he is actually low level and incompetent. He be-

lieves that it was his magic that allowed the group to defeat **Tremakrilon**. Fortunately for the clan, **Brattlefoot** has an uncanny tendency for blundering in the right direction just at the last moment.

Regina Lightwood: She is a female Knight from The Land of the South Winds. After serving a tour of duty in a wealthy merchant army, she returned home to find that her father (her only living relative) had been slain by a dragon. She does not know it, but the dragon slew her father over a petty magical item. She is a new recruit to the group, who has yet to be tested in draconic battle.

Maxwell: Max is the clan's healer. He was one of the townspeople who survived **Tremakrilon's** vengeful raid, although he did not join the group until after **Tremakrilon** was slain. He has begun to develop feelings for **Regina** and fears that her pursuit of revenge may get her hurt (possibly beyond his repair).

Antini: **Antini** is an adept **Za** magically disguised in human form. He has joined the group so that he may learn the magical secrets of a few dragons. The story he has told the clan is that his homeland was ravaged by dragons, and that he desires revenge. He pretends to be an ardent follower of **Vermius's** beliefs. He is unaware of **Gilkren's** true nature. Whether or not **Gilkren** is aware of his nature remains to be seen.

Pentlin Stonefret: He is an alchemist who is trying to work his way in as a member of the group. However, the clan's current policy is "no alchemists." **Gilkren** doesn't trust them, and rightly so. **Pentlin's** motives are as **Gilkren** suspects — selfish. But the alchemist hasn't given up hope yet. He keeps popping up in the **darndest** of places, always ready with a helping hand (that **Gilkren** consistently refuses).

Dragon Hunter O.C.C.

Dragon Hunter Special Abilities

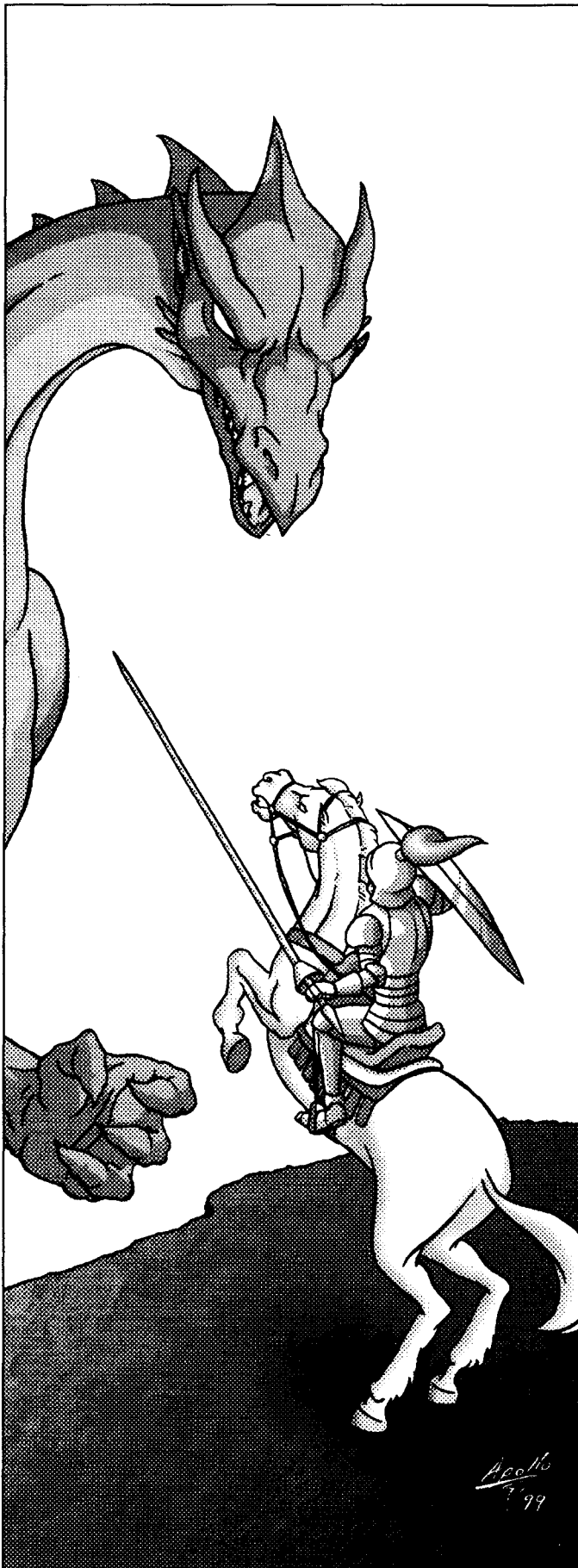
1. Dragon Hunting Powers

Each Dragon Hunter gains all of the special abilities available to the Dragon Hunter O.C.C. The abilities are learned automatically as the Dragon Hunter reaches the appropriate level. Thus, all level one abilities are learned at level one, all level three at level three, all level five at level five, etc.

2. Special skills

Dragon Lore: This is the study of all knowledge regarding dragons and anything related. It includes an in-depth knowledge of dragon mentality and habits, dragon physiology, and dragon ecology (including territorial habits and whatnot). This skill is from a human perspective. Thus, it includes the majority of that which humans know about dragons, which is, in the grand scheme of things, rather small. Dragons are a mystery, and this skill is by no means comprehensive. **Base Skill:** 25%+5% per level.

Tracking Dragons: This is a variant of the tracking **humanoids** skill which specializes in tracking dragons. The Dragon Hunter is familiar with all of the tell-tale signs that a dragon leaves behind when he passes by. Counter tracking is possible with this ability, although it is often futile since dragons most often use magic to do their tracking. **Base Skill:** 25%+5% per level. Other creatures may be tracked at half the normal percentage.



3. P.P.E.

Beginning P.P.E. for the Dragon Hunter is 1D4x10 plus the P.E. attribute. The character gains 2D6 P.P.E. per level.

4. Bonuses: +2 to Initiative, +1 to Dodge, +2 to Saving Throw vs. Horror Factor.

Alignment: Any

Attribute Requirements: P.S. 10, P.E. 12, P.P. 10, M.E. 10.

O.C.C. Skills:

Dragon Lore (+25%)

Tracking Dragons (+20%)

Athletics (general)

Detect Concealment & Traps (+10%)

Surveillance (+10%)

Climb/Scale Walls (+15%)

Prowl (+15%)

Language: Native tongue at 98%, plus one of choice (+15%)

Wilderness Survival (+15%)

W.P. Shield

W.P. Pole Arms

W.P. **Two** of choice.

Hand to Hand: Expert, which can be changed to Hand to Hand: Martial Arts or Assassin (if evil) for the cost of one O.C.C. Related skill.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select eight other skills at level one, plus select one additional at levels three, six, nine and twelve.

Communications: Sign Language only.

Domestic: Any

Espionage: Any (+5%)

Horsemanship: General or Exotic only (+5%).

Medical: First Aid only.

Military: Any (+10%)

Physical: Any

Rogue: Any

Science: Mathematics only.

Scholar/Technical: Any

Weapon Proficiencies: Any

Wilderness: Any (+5%)

Secondary Skills: The character gets to select four Secondary Skills from the above list at level one, and two additional skills at levels four, eight and twelve. These skills do not gain the listed bonuses.

Starting Equipment: Basic equipment, including a set of clothing, boots, gloves, a bedroll, a backpack, a large sack, a waterskin, a tinder box, and rope (20 feet/6.1 m). Characters will be given any necessary equipment upon assignment.

Armor: Character's choice of basic armor, usually chain or scale. When on assignment, characters will have access to the clan's armory.

Weapons: Character's choice of basic weapon. As with armor, characters will have full access to the clan's armory when on assignment.

Money: 3D6x10 gold. May have access to the clan's treasury as necessary.

Experience:

Dragon Hunter

1 0,000-2,060

2 2,061-4,120

3 4,121-8,240

4 8,241-15,100

5 15,101-23,100

6 23,101-33,100

7 33,101-48,200

8 48,201-68,300

968,301-93,400

1093,401-133,500

11 133,501-175,600

12 175,601-223,700

13 223,701-273,800

14 273,801-325,900

15 325,901-385,100

Special Abilities

As the clan hunts and gains experience and power, they have begun to develop certain supernatural abilities. Unfortunately, fate has delivered them with a twist. The more and more the Dragon Hunters grow and hunt, the more and more they become like dragons themselves. True, it is **Gilkren** who has used his magic to imbue the clan with these powers, but he does not understand them. Gilkren is messing with forces beyond his own control. He is right now caught between fear of these powers and enthrallment with his own magic. Gilkren loves power, and he sees his ability to instill these powers as **deific**. Exactly who or what is truly behind these mystical powers remains to be seen.

Gilkren has used his magic and **Vermius'** charm to convince the clan that these powers are perfect for their fight. He is preaching a sort of "fight fire with fire" philosophy. None of the clan members have witnessed their greatest ability (Metamorphosis: Dragon), but when they do, the reaction is bound to be mixed and unpredictable. Indeed, it is even hard to say how Vermius himself will react to such an ability. Eventually, the clan will have to face the fact that, in a roundabout way, they are becoming more and more like that which they hate.

Note: As far as the breath weapon abilities are concerned, Gilkren, realizing that breathing fire and such is a little too dragon-like, has constructed some magical dragon-head wands which may be used to execute the breath weapons. The breath simply comes from the mouth of the dragon upon the wand. Little do the clan members know that they are able to breathe these weapons from their own mouths.

Dragonlust

Range: Self

Duration: 2D6 melee rounds.

P.P.E.: 3

Level: The character gains this ability at level one.

This ability is a result of the primary drive of all Dragon Hunters: the lust to kill dragons. The ability drives them to the verge of frenzy, clearing all thoughts from their head that don't have anything to do with killing dragons. They can still think clearly, as long as they're thinking about fighting a dragon. The ability confers upon them the following bonuses:

+2 on Initiative

+3 to Strike and Damage

+3 to Parry (no bonus to Dodge)

One additional attack per round

Double damage versus all true dragons

Note: This ability may **ONLY** be used when fighting dragons.

Dragontough

Range: Self

Duration: Always active.

P.P.E.: None

Level: The character gains this ability at level one.

This ability, called "Dragontough" by the clan members, gives them a special defensive edge versus dragons. It gives them some special bonuses and basic immunities that make it possible for the Dragon Hunters to face dragons on a more preferable playing field. They gain the following:

+2 to saving throws versus draconic magic attacks

+2 to saving throws versus draconic psionic attacks

+3 to saving throws versus breath weapons (where applicable)

+2 to saving throws versus draconic special abilities (such as the basilisk's eye)

Immune to draconic Horror Factor

Immune to dragon's "awe gaze"

Eyes of the Dragon

Range: Self

Duration: 1D6 rounds per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 5

Level: Characters gain this ability at level two.

The eyes of the character begin to glow with a fiery, golden magic. The character is now able to see the world as if through the eyes of a dragon. He gains the following abilities.

Night vision 100 feet (30.5m)

Excellent (better than 20/20) color vision

See the invisible

See Ley Lines and Rifts

In addition to these, the ability makes the character more visually attuned to magical energies in general. The character is now seeing the world from a magical perspective, in which everything appears subtly different.



Claws of the Dragon

Range: Self

Duration: 1 round per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 6

Level: The character gains this ability at level three.

The hands of the Dragon Hunter become lethal weapons with this ability. He is able to grow wicked, draconic claws upon his

hands. They give him an additional 1D6 to his damage when attacking with them. The claws are specifically **crafted** for tearing the flesh of a dragon and give the attacker an additional +1 to strike due to their ability to penetrate the dragon's A.R.

Sense Dragon

Range: 1000 feet (305 m) +100 feet (30.5 m) per level.

Duration: 10 minutes per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 6

Level: The character gains this ability at level three.

This ability attunes the Dragon Hunter to the magical emanations of a dragon. He can sense the presence of any dragon within the range of the ability. This includes dragons that are invisible, disguised, **metamorphed**, etc. The character can sense the approximate direction and distance of the dragon, but not the exact location. Furthermore, the Dragon Hunter is attuned to the magical emanations that a dragon leaves behind. He can sense remaining emanations as old as twelve hours. After that, they become too faint to detect. When using this ability, the Hunter gains an additional +15% to his Dragon Tracking skill. This aspect of the ability also gives the Dragon Hunter the ability to sense a dragon's lair, regardless of how long ago the dragon occupied it.

Strangely enough, because **Gilkren** is the source of the Dragon Hunters' powers, this ability does not allow them to detect him, or any trace emanations that he may leave behind.

Hide Of The Dragon

Range: Self

Duration: 2 rounds per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 7

Level: Characters first acquire this ability at level five.

This ability makes the Dragon Hunter's skin tough like that of a dragon, thus increasing his natural Armor Rating. The character acquires an Armor Rating equal to his current level as Dragon Hunter, plus three. Thus, a fifth level Dragon Hunter would gain an A.R. of eight, while a twelfth level Dragon Hunter would gain an A.R. of fifteen. As the Dragon Hunter increases in level, his skin becomes increasingly scaly and dragon-like when he activates this ability.

Strength of the Dragon

Range: Self

Duration: 2 rounds per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 7

Level: Characters acquire this ability at level five.

This ability gives characters Supernatural Strength similar to that of the dragon. The ability increases as the character rises in level. At level five, the character may add five points to his Physical Strength. At level ten he may add ten, and at level fifteen he may add twenty. The character's Strength is considered Supernatural, and he does damage according to that listed in the Supernatural Strength damage table.

Poison Breath

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m), six feet (1.8 m) wide.

Duration: Instantaneous

P.P.E.: 7

Saving Throw: 12 or higher vs. Magic is needed to save.

Level: The character gains this ability at level seven.

This is a cloud of poisonous breath similar to that of a Kukulcan. The cloud does 3D6 S.D.C. to all those who breathe it. It is wide enough to strike several opponents (2-6) if they are huddled closely together.

Breath of Ice

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m), six feet (1.8 m) wide.

Duration: Instantaneous

P.P.E.: 8

Level: The character gains this ability at level seven.

This is an icy cloud like that which an Ice Dragon belches out. The cloud does 4D6 S.D.C. Anyone caught in the cloud also suffers from numbing cold; -2 to initiative, -1 to strike, parry and dodge. The cloud is wide enough to strike several opponents (2-6) if they are huddled closely together.



Breath of Fire

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m), six feet (1.8 m) wide.

Duration: Instantaneous

P.P.E.: 8

Level: The character gains this ability at level nine.

The character is able to belch forth an enormous pillar of flame. All those hit by it suffer 6D6 S.D.C. The cone is wide enough to strike multiple opponents (2-6) if they are huddled together.

Corrosive Breath

Range: 30 feet (9.1 m), six feet (1.8 m) wide.

Duration: Instantaneous

P.P.E.: 10

Level: The character gains this ability at level nine.

This spray of noxious liquid is a breath weapon like that of a Hydra. The spray does 4D6 S.D.C. to anyone it comes in contact with. If the liquid is not washed off immediately then it continues to cause damage. On the second and third rounds it does 2D6 S.D.C. each, and on the three following rounds it does 1D6 S.D.C. The spray is wide enough that it will strike multiple opponents (2-6) if they are huddled together.

Metamorphosis: Dragon

Range: Self

Duration: One hour per level of experience.

P.P.E.: 100

Level: The character gains this ability at level fifteen.

At fifteenth level, the Dragon Hunter gains the greatest of all abilities — the power to turn into a dragon. The Dragon Hunter grows to between 30-50 feet (9-15 m) in size and gains the full appearance of a dragon (Note: The character does not look like a particular species of known dragon, nor is he able to).

While transformed, all of the character's other powers are active (no additional P.P.E. cost) as well as the following:

+1D4x100 S.D.C.

Breath weapons are useable twice per round (any combination of two), and they cost no additional P.P.E. to use.

Fly 40 mph (64 km)

Fire and cold resistant (half damage)

Bio-regenerate 1D4x10 S.D.C. per minute (once every 4 melee rounds)

Note that while this ability is similar to the Spell of Legend, it is NOT a Spell of Legend (i.e. cannot be learned by Wizards or anyone else). Also note that while the character has the full appearance and many of the abilities of a dragon, he is NOT a true dragon.

Hook, Line, And Sinkers™

Crash Course

Hook: This is an adventure set up with low level beginners in mind. The players have been sent to a not-too-distant town to gather recruits for the clan, and they've been ordered not to return empty-handed.

Line: The players find a dozen possible candidates, but **Gilkren** has not properly prepared the players to make their selection. All **Gilkren** has said is that only the best may join. The players must come up with and execute a suitable set of challenges and tests to select the best recruits (3-4 of the 12).

Sinker: As soon as they finish their selection, they get word that an enormous **Wooly Dragon** (it's actually a hatchling) is tearing up some of the nearby farms. The players must put their new recruits to the test immediately.

Did You Ring?

Hook: The players are sent by **Vermius** to steal a magical ring from the fortress of a dragon-friendly Wizard.

Line: The "fortress" turns out to be an underground labyrinth full of traps and surprises, and the ring is nowhere to be found.

Sinker: The fortress is no fortress at all, but a lair — the lair of a dragon. The players were duped into breaking into the lair by **Gilkren** so that he could spy on the enemy dragon magically

through their eyes. The dragon is away when they arrive, but his minions aren't. Just as the Player Characters realize what's going on, the alarm is sounded. Now it's a race against time to escape before they're stuck facing an angry dragon alone.

The Price of a Good Sword

Hook: **Vermius** sends the players on a simple mission to purchase a Dragon Slayer sword from a wealthy merchant in a **Timiro** city.

Line: The merchant is a fake, and he has no sword at all.

Sinker: The merchant is also a bandit. He intends to rob the characters, capture them, and sell them into slavery, but not before torturing all of the clan's secrets out of them first (which he can turn around for a very healthy profit).

The Double Edge

Hook: The clan plans a raid on a dragon cult monastery that is rumored to possess some dragon slaying weapons. The objective is to do as much damage to the monastery as possible and to steal as many of the weapons as possible. The clan expects the monks to put up very little resistance.

Line: The clan attacks the monastery right in the middle of an important ceremony to which all of the cult's most powerful warriors have gathered. As the clan busts in, they are gathered about, kneeling before their dragon-idol, with all of the dragon slaying weapons hanging on the walls about them.

Sinker: The dragon slaying weapons do just as much damage to dragon slayers as they do to dragons (that's 1D6x10 S.D.C.!). The unhappy warriors draw their weapons and attack.

The Hidden Smile

Hook: The players come across the dead body of a clan member in one of the keep's chambers. The victim was a low level member of the clan, and it is obvious that he's been murdered. He has deep, black burns and large claw marks all over his body, and his eyes have been turned completely black. Further scorch marks and destruction litter the chamber.

Line: The clansman was killed by **Madax**, an adult **Nightstalker Dragon** disguised as one of the clan's new members. **Madax** had unsuccessfully attempted to corrupt the clansman with his breath weapon. Before long, other members of the clan start showing up with blackened eyes. Only they aren't dead, and their hearts are filled with mischief and cruelty.

Sinker: When **Gilkren** (away on research) returns, **Madax** will realize what's going on and try to take over the clan by murdering **Gilkren** and assuming his form. What's worse, if he catches **Gilkren** by surprise he just might succeed. The players must find **Madax** and destroy him before the clan is destroyed from within (and yes, **Madax** does have magical protection from detection, including the clan's ability to sense dragons. So it won't be easy).

Goblin's Jewel

Hook: Two of the Player characters are on guard duty when a lone **Goblin** wanders by their post. The **Goblin** screams and runs, but, after being chased into a corner by the characters, he fights to the death or is somehow killed.

Line: On his body, the players find an ornate gem that looks a little too suspicious to found on a **Goblin**. They take it to

Gilkren, who tells them that it is a magical tracking beacon. They look outside the window just in time to see an army marching on the horizon.

Sinker: The Goblin was a scout sent by Abralion, an adult Fire Dragon and long time enemy of **Gilkren's**. He has heard rumors of the clan, and, fearing attack, he's decided to throw the first punch (his suspicions were correct, as he was high on Gilkren's list of targets). He is currently marching on the fortress with an army. The details are up to the G.M., but the possibilities are endless. He could attack with anything from a swarm of Goblins to a battalion of Magots.

World Warriors

More Than Karate and Kung Fu

Optional New Martial Arts for Ninjas & Superspies and Other Palladium Games

By Ben Cassin Lucas

When somebody speaks those two little words — "martial arts" — what do you think of? Jackie Chan? Karate Kid? **Bruce Lee**? Funky white pyjamas? Old, poorly-subtitled Hong Kong action movies with excessive sound effects? Yeah, me too.

What's the common theme here? All these visual keys relate back to their Asian source. I'm not one to dispute that Asia is the global hub of martial arts styles, but I think that in order to enjoy a complete role-playing experience, we should remember that many other countries also have a lot to offer. Let's think to movies like *Only the Strong*, *Rocky* and *Last of the Mohicans* (it's true - I've heard well reputed martial arts experts place this amongst the greatest ever martial arts movies) for inspiration.

My personal martial arts experience has only ever been with Japanese styles (with a smudge of Kung Fu for good measure), but through friends, active reading and countless hours of movie going, I have developed an appreciation for martial arts derived outside the Asian countries. Russia, France, Brazil, Israel, Africa - it's all out there. On top of this, there are the many Westernized off-shoots of traditional Asian arts that crop up by the dozen each year. For example, many years ago in Germany it was illegal to train in Karate, but people did it anyway, teaching themselves from films and books. In South Africa, self defense schools popped up developing their own unique blend of styles. It is even my personal dream, maybe ten years from now, to develop my own style based on a synthesis of Karate, Aikido and Wing Chun. Thus, new arts are created outside the Asian theater.

So what does this add up to as far as role-playing goes? Well, I'm a great admirer of the Palladium treatment of martial arts. I think they have done well to show the individual flavor and mysticism of the various styles available. However, I see a wide open gap that needs to be filled, and that's the international element. So let's take a quick trip around the world and pull together some of the more well-known alternatives.

Brazilian JiuJitsu

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 14, P.E. 12, P.P. 11, M.E. 10.

Skill Cost: 6 years (4 years secondary).

How is Brazilian JiuJitsu different from normal JiuJitsu? The Brazilian variant is often seen as much harder, more aggressive and more wrestling-oriented. It lends itself better to competitive fighting and Shoot Karate (a kind of Karate-wrestling tournament). Brazilian JiuJitsu masters are recognizable by their lean yet powerful and muscled builds, their flexibility and knowledge of nasty joint locks. Like Sambo (see below) and Wrestling (see **Rifter #3**), it's a ground based grappling style that can immobilize and subdue opponents with as much or as little damage as desired.

Kicking and punching is involved, but on the ground the B.J. master is at home, twisting and grinding his opponent into the ground. Against multiple opponents, the fighter is left with only a few basic options to strike and move, but against a single foe very little will stand in his way.

Stance: Similar to a low wrestling stance, with the body forward and hands open to receive or to tackle. The stance is often personalized or moved more upright in normal fighting situations.

Costume: Lycra shorts and a mouth guard. That's all you get! Anything more could be used by an opponent to strangle with or just hang on to.

Character Bonuses:

Add 3 to P.S.

Add 3 to P.E.

Add 15 to S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Auto-Roll, Breakfall.

Basic Defenses: Dodge, Parry, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Power Parry.

Hand Attacks: Punch, **Backfist**, Elbow, Forearm, Palm Strike.

Foot Attacks: Knee, Kick, Snap Kick, **Trip/Hook**, Reverse Turning Kick.

Special Attacks: None.

Throws: Body **Flip/Throw**, Shoot-Through (Special! Basically a crash tackle, uses the Throw bonus but tackles the opponent to the ground; only does 1D4 damage, but the practitioner



can move straight into a lock of any description after tackling).

Holds/Locks: Head Lock, Elbow Lock, Knee Lock (same as an Elbow Lock, but affects the knee), Wrist Lock, Body Lock (same as a leg lock, but catches around the torso).

Weapon Skills: None.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attacks: Pull Punch.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select two from amongst Body Hardening and Martial Arts Techniques; these may be exchanged one on one for physical skills.

Skills: Body Building.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

- 1st Critical Strike on a natural roll of 20 or from behind, +2 Pull Punch, +2 Roll/Breakfall, +1 Strike, +1 Tackle/Throw.
 2nd +2 damages, +1 Throw/Tackle, +2 Parry.
 3rd KO on a natural roll of 20, +1 Holds/Locks.
 4th Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20, +2 Dodge.
 5th +1 Strike, +1 Throw/Tackle, +1 attack.
 6th +2 Roll/Breakfall, KO on a natural 19 or 20.
 7th +2 Locks/Holds, +1 damages.
 8th Auto-Body Flip/Throw, Maintain Balance.
 9th +1 attack, Critical Body Flip/Throw.
 10th +2 Parry, +1 Ddodge.
 11th Disarm, +1 Locks/Holds.
 12th +1 Strike, +2 Roll/Breakfall, +1 Disarm.
 13th +1 attack, +1 Throw/Tackle, +1 damages.
 14th Death Blow on a natural roll of 20, +2 Maintain Balance.
 15th +1 Strike, +1 Parry/Dodge, +1 Throw/Tackle, +1 Locks/Holds.

Why study Brazilian Jiujitsu?

If you're looking for spiritual enlightenment, do a traditional style. If you're in it just to have fun, do Capoeira. If you want to join a fairly elite group of competition fighters, this is the path to take. If you want to be a real hardcase with a devastating array of moves up your sleeve, this is also for you.

Capoeira (exclusive)

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 10, P.P. 14, M.A. 13.

Skill Cost: 7 years (4 years as a secondary).

NOTE: Worldly Martial Artists can take Capoeira, even though it's exclusive.

In the 1990's this martial art is getting more and more exposure. Those who experience Capoeira rarely fail to fall in love with it — it is a style of raw charisma. It used to be far more obscure, however, only a few short years ago. Rather akin (in background only) to traditional Ninjitsu, in that the common folk created the style as a deceptive way to retaliate. Developed by Caribbean slaves in manacles, it was practiced under the guise of dance movements to avoid persecution by the slave traders. As such, it is a very proud martial art, seeped in spiritual tradition. It is only recently that it has seen release to the general public, though training halls are still quite rare. There are two styles of Capoeira - a student of the art **learns** both. One is the traditional *Angola*, which is dance based and low to the ground, and the other is a newer variant developed in the 1930's, called *Regional*, which is more upright and similar to Tai Kwon Do.

Capoeira is very demanding, and a common criticism is its ineffectiveness as a fighting form. While many martial arts preach maximum **effect** for minimum effort, Capoeira is quite the other way around. Requiring great energy and physical strength, the style revolves around rhythmic turning, flipping and leaping movements to baffle and eventually overwhelm the opponent. The hands are rarely used, if ever (remember, the slaves were in chains). Rather, they stay high protecting the face. The main element of defense is to keep at least one foot always in an opponent's face, thereby throwing him off guard. If this fails, then constant cartwheels and flips will disorient him until a good solid kick can be delivered. And as kicks go, Capoeira has it all. The benefit of this style is that it's very ag-



gressive, and **because** only kicks are used, it keeps the body positioned a long way from the opponent. Many kicks are done while in a handstand, therefore the torso and head are out of harm's way.

A student will rarely do Capoeira because he wants to learn how to fight. He will do it for fitness, for flexibility, for the acrobatic skills it teaches, but most of all, for fun. Capoeira students don't fight, they *jogar* (play) in a *roda* (circle) of fellow students. Instruments are broken out, a beat is established and the event begins. Invariably, Capoeira masters are good entertainers and incorrigible show-offs. But don't be fooled — to master Capoeira is to develop a body that is almost superhuman in its strength and fluidity. Try **doing** a one-handed handstand and then the splits while up there, and you'll appreciate how effective Capoeira can really be.

Students are also taught how to play various percussion and string instruments so they can set a rhythm for the training sessions — it is all based on dance movements after all.

Stance: Hard to quantify... the constantly shifting stance of Capoeira is called the *Ginga*, and involves bowing the body forward, keeping the arms high and open. The forward leg

shifts constantly from the left to right leg in a sweeping motion. It has to be seen to be explained.

Costume: Just a loose set of cotton pants. No shoes. Sometimes a T-shirt is worn for modesty.

Character Bonuses:

Add 3 to P.S.

Add 2 to P.P.

Add 2 to P.E.

Add 2 to M.A.

Add 5 to S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Auto-Roll.

Basic Defenses: Dodge, Parry (Note: no Auto-Parry until 3rd level!).

Advanced Defenses: Multi-Dodge, Somersault, Back-Flip, Maintain Balance.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Slap (Special! Stings a little, does 1 point of damage).

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, Axe Kick, Flying Reverse Turning Kick, Backward Sweep, Trip/Hook, Drop Kick (combination **dodge/kick**), *Amada* (Spinning Crescent Kick, does 1D10 and may be done as many times as desired in a row, but may not parry), *Queixada* (same as a Crescent Kick), *Au-Bachido* (involves standing up on one hand, swinging the back foot forward over the body and striking down on the opponent; may only be done once per melee round and requires a P.S. of at least 16 to perform; does 2D6+2 damage), *Rasteira* (full sweep with both legs, using the hands as a pivot, does 1D6 damage and opponent loses one attack and initiative), *Queddaderins* (a very unique attack; the martial artist balances on his palms, elbows tucked into his chest, face side onto the ground, and mule kicks up into the opponent's face; takes 2 attacks to perform and does 2D10+2 damage), *Meia-Luadecompass* (keeping one hand on the ground and using one grounded leg as a pivot, the free leg swings through the air and catches the opponent on the side of the face; may be done as many times as desired in a round, but parrying is not permitted; does 1D10 damage), Double-Foot Kick (leaping up, both feet thrust forward at once; may only be done once per melee round; sometimes the kick lands in a handstand, or is used to **Backflip** away from an opponent; does 2D6+2 damage).

Special Attacks: *TesourasRastiera* (scissor take-down; launching at the opponent, the martial artist locks his legs around the opponent and takes him down; opponent loses initiative and one attack; does 1D8 damage), Handstand Attack and Defense, Backflip, Cartwheel (offensive and defensive), Lunging **Head-Butt** (Special! An almost comical attack if it didn't hurt so much; the Capoeira master dives at his opponent and **Head-Butts** him in the gut; does 1D6 damage and opponent loses initiative), **Jump/Leap** Attack.

Throws: None.

Holds/Locks: None.

Weapon Skills: Very special indeed; W.P. Club (Stick) & W.P. Paired, W.P. Short Sword (also paired), W.P. Knife (Special! This represents a straight-razor used in the toes; full bonuses apply to using the weapon in the feet, but may not be used to parry; W.P. Knife must be taken as a separate skill if the character wishes to be able to use a knife normally).

Special Katas: When entering combat, the martial artist must choose between *Angola* and *Regional* styles. If he chooses the *Angola*, he automatically loses initiative in the first round of combat only, but has +2 to initiative for every round thereafter.

Modifiers to Attacks: Pull Punch.

Special: When set to rhythm, Capoeira becomes energized. Being that training conditions are under music, combat under the same conditions is likewise enhanced. All it takes is a few friends to clap a beat, or better still a stereo system playing traditional Capoeira training music. If this is the case, the martial artist gains +2 to all the flashier moves - Cartwheel, Back-Flip, Handstand and most of the more impressive kicks (This includes use of the paired fighting sticks, which when used correctly should even set a rhythm in the way they strike!). No, wearing a portable radio does not help. It's the atmosphere, not the actual music.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select two from amongst Body Hardening and Martial Arts Techniques; these may be exchanged one on one for physical skills.

Skills: Gymnastics.

Philosophical Training: Effectively none, though more involved students will come to appreciate the history and philosophy.

Cultural Skills: Dance, Singing, Musical Instrument (*Berimbau* — stringed instrument that is fanned with a pluck; *Pandero* — tambourine; *Atabaque* — big congo drum; all three are covered by the one skill).

Languages: Portuguese.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st +2 Roll, Critical Strike on a natural 20 or from behind, +1 Flip/Cartwheel/Somersault.

2nd +2 Dodge, +2 Maintain Balance, +2 Pull Punch.

3rd +1 attack, +2 Handstand, Auto-Parry.

4th +1 Flip/Cartwheel/Somersault, +1 Kick.

5th May use elbows, +1 Pull, +1 Roll, Critical Strike on natural 19 and 20, +2 kick damage.

6th +1 attack, +1 Maintain Balance, +2 Initiative.

7th +4 feet (1.2 m) to Leap distance, KO on a natural 19 or 20, +2 on all Jump/Leap attacks.

8th +2 Dodge, +1 Kick, Circular Parry.

9th Critical Strike on an 18, 19 or 20, +1 Roll.

10th Circular Parry, +1 Strike, +1 Initiative, +1 to damages.

11th +1 M.A.!, +1 Jump/Leap attacks, +4 feet (1.2 m) Leap distance.

12th +1 attack, +1 Handstand/Cartwheel/Somersault.

13th +1 Strike, +1 Dodge/Parry.

14th +1 Kick, Auto-Dodge.

15th Death Blow on a natural 20 (but only with a kick), +1 Roll and gain Breakfall, +1 Flip/Cartwheel/Somersault.

Capoeira Glossary of Terms

Meistre (may-estri): master or teacher.

Regional (re-jonale): more recent, more conventional Capoeira fighting style.

Angola: traditional dance style Capoeira, low to the ground.

Ginga (jin-ga): the dancing, constantly moving stance of the student. It involves sweeping the feet back and forth, rather than standing still, therefore keeping the opponent on edge.

Roda (hoe-da): circle of students.

Jogar (hoe-ga): to play, or in conventional terms, to practice fighting.

Mandinga (man-DI-ya): sorcery, or magic. To master Mandinga is the ultimate step in Capoeira, establishing the final ritual link with the Meistre ancestors and letting their skill possess the student. Legends speak of the greatest Capoeira Meistre of all time, who was impervious to bullets, and who was killed by a poisoned knife.

Why do Capoeira?

T' feel *da'* rhythm, mon. People stick to Capoeira because they love it. The fitness and self defense are incidental. The enjoyment comes first, and that's why one studies Capoeira. It can be a very effective martial art, but in group situations or against other martial artists, it may fail if the student is not well trained and in prime shape. It tends to be very aggressive, and poor defensively.

Jeet Kun Do

Entrance Requirements: P.P. 13, P.E. 12, P.S. 12, I.Q. 12.

Skill Cost: 6 years (5 years as a secondary).

OK, fine, this may appear Chinese, but it deserves recognition, and it *was* founded in America. Jeet Kun Do was developed by Bruce Lee, founded on his original principles of Wing Chun. He began teaching in America, and started a bit of a ruckus in the Chinese community in doing so. Since then, JKD has gone on to be inspirational to countless other styles around the world. Bruce Lee's "Way of the Intercepting Fist" is a very basic approach to fast, effective martial arts power. From his movies and screen appearances, and since-produced video games, we may imagine JKD to be flashy and acrobatic. Not so. The truth is, it was very easy to **learn**. Kicking above the knee was seen as pointless. The emphasis was (and is) placed on raw striking power — economy of movement and blinding speed. Once these things have been mastered, then the student can go on to learn other techniques within the range of his abilities.

Bruce Lee was quoted as saying martial arts "must evolve." Jeet Kun Do was his contribution to this evolution — a style that has no set forms or patterns, or structured ideals. Simple, effective, elegant.

Stance: Feet shoulder width apart, facing at 45 degrees. The hands are loose and held up in front of the chest, with the leading shoulder side toward the opponent, and the forward arm held out for protection. The legwork is very free, and balance tends to shift from foot to foot.

Costume: Loose Kung Fu pants with a simple white T-shirt and soft-soled shoes.

Character Bonuses:

Add 3 to P.P.

Add 2 to P.S.

Add 2 to P.E.

Add 3 to Spd.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Escape Moves: Roll, Maintain Balance.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Power Punch, One-Inch



Punch (Special! May only be used once per melee, and must be the first attack used that round; does 2D6 damage).

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Trip/Hook, Roundhouse.

Special Attacks: None.

Holds/Locks: None.

Weapon Skills: May select one of the following; W.P. Nunchaku, W.P. Knife, W.P. Short Sword, *or* may ignore weapons training to add +1 to Parry/Dodge.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Pull Punch, KO Punch, Death Blow, Jump/Leap Attack.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select one from amongst Body Hardening or Martial Arts Techniques; may be traded for a physical skill.

Skills: Anticipation (New! See below), plus select one of the following; Body Building, Gymnastics, Acrobatics, Tai Chi (New! See below), Qi Gong (New! See below) or Boxing.

Philosophical Training: Tao.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st +2 Strike, +2 Parry, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 20 or from behind, KO on a natural roll of 20.

2nd +2 damages, +2 Dodge.

3rd Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20, +3 Initiative.

4th Multiple Dodge, +4 feet (1.2 m) to Leap distance, Death Blow on a natural roll of 20.

5th +2 Strike, +2 Parry.

6th +2 attacks, +1 damage.

7th +2 Initiative, Axe Kick, Reverse Turning Kick.

8th Jumping Reverse Turning Kick, +4 feet (1.2 m) to Leap distance, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20.

9th Breakfall, +1 Strike, +1 damage.

10th +2 Initiative, Power Parry (does damage), Wheel Kick.

11th Elbow, Knee, Forearm Strikes, +3 Dodge.

12th +1 damage, select on power from Martial Art Techniques.

13th +1 Strike, +1 attack, +2 damage.

14th Circular Parry, Body Flip/Throw, Death Blow on a natural 19 or 20.

15th +1 attack, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Why Study Jeet Kun Do?

To follow in the footsteps of a great master may be reason enough. But the true answer lays in Jeet Kun Do's brilliant simplicity. A student of JKD will become faster and more powerful, and he will be able to fully defend himself in many situations (though for lower level students multiple attackers could be a problem). Think of this: to throw a bullet at someone with all your force would surely hurt them. To load that same bullet and fire it would be lethal. Why? Speed is the simple answer. Speed is power. If you understand this philosophy, you understand Jeet Kun Do's effectiveness. More than any other martial art, JKD has the most to gain from progression (experience levels).

Kick Boxing

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 10, P.E. 10.

Skill Cost: 4 years (2 years as a secondary).

Traditional kick boxing, as developed in Asia Minor, is detailed in **Ninjas and Superspies**. Muay Tai, as it is called, is an aggressive fighting art, seeped in tradition. The practitioners would often use knives or sticks to slice each other up with, grappling with each other to use knees and elbows to break the skin and cause as much damage as possible.

As truly frightening as this is, the Western variation is considerably softer and easier to learn. Most people start kick boxing to learn simple self defense, and then find themselves drawn into competition if they like it. Competitive kick boxing is much flashier than conventional boxing, though the use of elbows is forbidden. Kick Boxing has the quickest learning curve of any martial art, as far as getting effectiveness out of the combined use of kicks and punches.



Almost every major town or city will have several places where training in kick boxing is available.

Stance: The feet are relatively close together, facing forward like a boxing stance, except the back foot is very slightly turned out. The left foot is always forward. The hands are held high in front of the face, loose and ready to defend and counter.

Costume: Loose shorts and T-shirt with mouth guard, **shin/foot** guards and either 16 oz. (450 g) boxing gloves or light hand wraps for protection.

Character Bonuses:

Add 2 P.S.

Add 2 P.E.

Add 10 S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Escape Moves: Roll.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: None.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Power Punch.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Axe Kick, Jump Kick, Trip/Hook, Thigh Kick (Special! A great self defense move ploughed into the muscles of the thigh, this strike does 1D10 damage and causes the opponent to lose one attack and initiative unless he makes a saving throw vs. pain [14+]), Knee Strike (1D6), Switch-Kick (by flicking the legs into a crossed stance and then exploding into a roundhouse, tremendous power is gained; does 2D6+2 damage, and may only be performed once per melee).

Special Attacks: None.

Holds/Locks: Neck Grapple (Special! Akin to the boxing tactic of grabbing an opponent, the kick boxing variety allows the combatants to start using Knees; unlike other Grapples, both combatants remain standing; make a normal Grapple roll, and for every round the combatants remain linked to each other, the only attacks allowed are Knees and Snap Kicks; if an opponent has no Knee attack, then that's tough for him!).

Weapon Skills: None.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Jump/Leap attacks, KO Strikes, Death Blow, Pull Punch.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select one from either Body Hardening or Martial Arts Techniques.

Skills: Select two physical skills, but not Gymnastics or Acrobatics.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st KO on a natural roll of 20, +1 Parry/Dodge, +1 Strike.

2nd +1 damage, +1 Strike.

3rd +1 attack, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20, or from behind.

4th +2 roll, +2 Pull Punch.

5th Combination Parry/Attack, +1 Initiative.

6th +2 to Neck Grapple special move, +1 damages.

7th +1 attack, +1 Strike.

8th KO on a natural roll of 19 or 20, +5 S.D.C.!

9th Critical Strike on a roll of 18, 19 or 20.

10th +2 Parry/Dodge.

11th +1 attack, +1 Strike.

12th KO on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20, +1 damages.

13th Death Blow on a natural roll of 20, +1 to Kick attacks.

14th +1 attack, may use Elbow and Forearm Strikes.

15th KO on a natural roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20; Critical Strike on a roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Why train in Kick Boxing?

It's very straight forward and uncomplicated, and it's readily available. It's also very effective, and great for body hardening and fitness. In combat situations, it teaches the essential skills needed for defeating an opponent. Against multiple attackers, only experienced kick boxers will be able to use their skills effectively.

Krav Mahga

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 13, M.E. 12, P.S. 12.

Skill Cost: 7 years (5 years as a secondary).

Developed recently in Israel as a self defense form, this is one brutal martial art. Before its slow release to public use in America, Krav Mahga can trace its roots to the commando training of the elite **MOSSAD** special forces units.

Krav Mahga's philosophy is simple: If it hurts your opponent, it can't be all that bad. Biting, gouging, elbowing, kneeling to the groin — it's all there. If it works, chuck it in for good measure. Yet Krav Mahga is not at all complicated or underdeveloped. Quite the opposite. It is coldly efficient and altogether brutal.

Stance: The stance is whatever you happen to be standing in at the moment, though in training situations, the stance tends to be quite low, legs bent, one foot in front of the other, with both hands open, on either side of the face. In a fight involving weapons, the hands are held close to the body, if a fight is unarmed, the hands are held out and forward.

Costume: Military fatigues and a T-shirt. Tend to train in shoes or even boots.

Character Bonuses:

Add 1 to M.A.

Add 2 to P.S.

Add 1 to P.E.

Add 1 to P.P.

Add 10 to S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Breakfall.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack, Power Parry (does damage), Multiple Dodge.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Power Punch, Backhand, Double Knuckle Fist, Fingertip Attack, Claw Hand, Elbow, Forearm.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Roundhouse, Trip/Hook, Snap Kick, Knee, Drop Kick (Combination Dodge/Kick).

Special Attacks: Body Flip/Throw.

Holds/Locks: Wrist Lock, Elbow Lock, Head Lock.

Weapon Skills: W.P. Knife.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Pull Punch, KO, Death Blow, Jump Attack.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: None.

Skills: Select one physical skill, but not Acrobatics, Gymnastics, Qi Gong, Tai Chi or Yoga.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20 or from behind, Death Blow on a natural roll of 20, KO on a natural roll of 20, +1 Strike, +1 damage.

2nd +2 Parry and Dodge.

3rd +1 attack, KO on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

4th Circular Parry, +1 Initiative, +1 Body Flip/Throw.

5th +2 Pull Punch, +2 Roll/Breakfall.

6th Select one Body Hardening power, +1 Strike.

7th Critical Body Flip/Throw, Death Blow on a natural 19 or 20.

8th +1 attack, KO on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20.

9th Critical Strike on a natural 18, 19 or 20.

10th +1 Parry/Dodge, +2 damages, +1 Roll/Breakfall.

11th Critical Strike on a natural 17, 18 19 or 20.

12th Death Blow on a natural 18, 19 or 20; +1 to Body Flip/Throw.

13th Auto Body Flip/Throw, +1 Strike.

14th Critical Strike on a natural 16, 17, 18, 19 or 20.

15th KO on a natural 17, 18, 19 or 20; Critical Strike on a natural 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Why train in Krav Mahga?

Because you want to learn how to kick butt, basically. Because you live in a rough neighborhood and need the protection, or because you're a hardcase who needs the skills to survive. Or, you're a **MOSSAD** special agent. Discounting the last option,



the student of **Krav** Mahga is a tough opponent in all brawling situations — bar none. Good if you want instant **results**, but don't expect to achieve any great heights of excellence.

Munen Muso

Entrance Requiements: I.Q. 10, P.S. 10, P.P. 10, MA. 12.

Skill Cost: 6 years (cannot be taken as a secondary).

Munen Muso was developed in Australia as a mix of several styles. Aikido, Jeet Kun Do, Muay Tai and Filipino stick fighting combine to make a lightning fast, self defense oriented style. Imagine the speed of Bruce Lee packed into a grappling style — and this is Munen Muso. The founder of the martial art, Gary Johnson, created Munen Muso with his solid 24 years of experience, including training with personal friends of Bruce Lee and actual Filipino masters. His wide array of teaching credentials include police and military forces, as well as civilian self defense classes.

Having met the man personally, I can say he is a wonderful, peaceful, personable human being. His hands are faster than the eye can follow, and his techniques are **eye-wateringly** effective. Students of Munen Muso aspire to be like him — compassionate, peaceful, yet ultimately being able to finish a fight within 2-3 seconds. Attacking a master of Munen Muso is a tragic mistake few repeat.

Munen Muso is Japanese, and roughly translates to (and don't quote me on this) "**calm/relaxed** in the face of adversity." Through a calm, relaxed mind comes incredible, reflexive power and ability.

Stance: The stance is low and ready with both knees bent, feet facing forward, and the hands kept close to the body for protection.

Costume: Basic Karate outfit with white top and black pants. Students train barefoot.

Character Bonuses:

Add 2 to M.A.

Add 2 to P.P.

Add 1 to P.S.

Add 1 to Spd.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Maintain Balance, Auto-Roll, **Breakfall**.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack, Auto Flip/Throw, Auto **Hold/Lock**, Power Parry, Multiple Dodge, **Parry/Lock** (Special! Works like a Parry/Attack, except the Parry goes straight into a Lock).

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Elbow, Palm, Knife Hand.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, **Trip/Hook**.

Special Attacks: Body Flip/Throw, Body **Block/Tackle**.

Holds/Locks: Wrist Lock, Elbow Lock, Neck Lock, Torso Hold, Finger Lock.

Weapon Skills: W.P. Knife, W.P. Short Blunt & W.P. Paired, W.P. Handcuff (application of W.P. Handcuff allows the character to apply handcuffs to any opponent he has in a Wrist, Elbow or Finger Lock at the cost of only one attack; if he already has the handcuffs in his hand, then it costs no actions to snap the handcuffs onto the opponent after the Lock has succeeded).

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Critical Strike from behind, **Knock-Out** Strike, Pull **Punch/Strike**.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select two Martial Arts Techniques.

Skills: Select one physical skill, but not Acrobatics.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st +2 **Parry/Dodge**, +3 Initiative, Critical Strike from behind and on a natural 20.

2nd +2 **Strike**, +2 **Roll/Breakfall**.

3rd +1 **attack**, +2 **Holds/Locks**.

4th Select one Martial Art Technique; +2 **Flip/Throw**.

5th +1 **Holds/Locks**, +2 Initiative.

6th +1 **attack**, +1 **Strike**, KO on a natural 20.

7th +3 **Parry**, +3 **Pull Punch**, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

8th +2 **Roll/Breakfall**, +2 **Damage**.

9th +1 **Throw/Hold**, +1 **Locks/Holds**.

10th Select one Atemi ability; +1 **Dodge**.

11th **Death Blow** on a natural roll of 20, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20.

12th Select one Martial Art Technique *or* one Atemi ability.

13th +1 **attack**, +1 **Strike**.

14th +2 Initiative, +1 **Roll/Breakfall**, +1 **damage**.

15th +2 **Parry**, KO on a natural 19 or 20.

Why study Munen Muso?

It is a very difficult style to learn, because only one man can teach it, currently, in Australia. However the rewards are a blistering combination of fast and effective moves. The Munen Muso master will enter combat and wait to react to the first sign of hostility. Then, when the slightest movement is caught, he either flattens the attacker with a series of rapid punches, or takes the opponent into a lock onto the ground. The greatest benefit of Munen Muso is that all the locks can be applied when the opponent is standing, therefore allowing for capture and then movement of the opponent with little fuss.

Panracean

Entrance Requirements: P.P. 13, P.S. 14, P.E. 13, **M.A. 8**.

Skill Cost: 8 years (6 years as a secondary).

Panracean Is actually an old Greek kick boxing art. Just like France developed Savate, the Greeks developed Panracean. Its roots are a mystery to me, but I do know that it is part of the same family that saw the development of Roman Wrestling and even Savate and Sambo. Very different martial arts, true, but related to each other nonetheless.

Panracean is similar to Muay Tai, in fact, except it tends to be a little more reliant on strength and power, and grappling ability, than speed or technique. The kicks are conservative and, especially today, the emphasis is placed more on the boxing side. Wrestling and grappling is still a large part of Panracean, but while all students are taught the basics involved, it is preferable to stay upright and fighting at arm's length. There is no weapons training involved.



Stance: Similar to a kick boxing stance, with the feet facing forward and only a shoulder width apart. The hands are kept close to the body and held up by the face for protection. Overall, the Pancracean fighting style is very relaxed.

Costume: A simple pair of shorts. Quite often a shirt or track suit will be worn, but traditionally the fighters wore very little.

Character Bonuses:

Add 3 to P.S.

Add 2 to P.E.

Add 2 to P.P.

Add 2 to Spd.

Add 15 to S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Escape Moves: Roll, Breakfall.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack, **Parry/Throw** (Special! Like a **Parry/Attack**, except the Parry goes straight into a Grapple or Body Flip of some kind; there is a distinct difference in the way this is performed as compared to an **Auto-Body Flip/Throw**).

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Elbow, Palm, Fore-Knuckle Fist.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, **Trip/Hook**, Roundhouse, Crescent Kick, Knee.

Special Attacks: Body Flip/Throw, **Body Block/Tackle**.

Holds/Locks: Wrist Lock, Elbow Lock.

Weapon Skills: None.

Special Kata's: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Critical Strike from behind, **Knock-Out** Strike, **Pull Punch/Strike**.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select one from Body Hardening.

Skills: Select one physical skill, but not Acrobatics.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: Greek.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st Critical Strike from behind or on a natural roll of 20; +2 Strike, +2 Pull Punch.

2nd +2 Parry/Dodge, +1 Roll/Breakfall.

3rd +1 attack; KO on a natural roll of 20.

4th Critical Strike on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

5th +1 Parry, +2 damage, Axe Kick, Neck Hold.

6th +1 **Throw/Flip**, +2 Pull Punch, +1 Strike.

7th +1 Dodge, +1 **Locks/Holds**, Knife Hand, Knee; KO on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

8th +2 **Roll/Breakfall**, +1 attack.

9th Select one power from Body Hardening, +2 damage.

10th Death Blow on a natural roll of 20; +1 **Parry/Dodge**.

11th +1 Strike, +1 **Flip/Throw**, +1 Pull Punch.

12th +1 attack, +5 S.D.C.

13th Forearm Attack, Reverse Turning Kick, gain the Lightning Kata as described under Tai Kick Boxing in **Ninjas and Superspies**.

14th Critical Strike on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20; +1 **Parry/Dodge**.

15th +1 attack.

Why study Pancracean?

A good **all-rounder** with some nice moves and a solid basis. Pancracean students are proficient fighters and are capable of defending themselves in most situations, including group attacks. As an added advantage, their grappling experience makes them far from helpless up close or on the ground. However, Pancracean lacks any true spiritual training, which may be a loss for some.

Pro Boxing (Pugilism)

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 12, P.P. 10, P.E. 14.

Skill Cost: 6 years (3 years secondary).

The fine art of boxing is everywhere in the world. It's very common, and incredibly popular. To run over its history and nuances would fill this entire book, so suffice to say boxing is a European based art of fisticuffs. Finding its roots centuries ago in basic, bare-fisted pit fights and working its way to modern day multi-million dollar prize fights, every campus of every college around the world today will have a gym training boxers.

Boxing is simple - it uses only the hands. In fact, it is unlike any other martial art in its direct, no nonsense approach. The feet are ignored as weapons, though good boxers tend to have fantastic footwork in the ring. Tackle a boxer to the ground, or keep him at foot's length and he may be in trouble, but one direct jab from his bulging arms is likely to knock you sprawling.

NOTE: if a character takes Pro Boxing as a hand to hand ability, he may not take the Boxing skill (one supersedes the other). The same is true of Tai Chi and Kick Boxing, described below.

Stance: Light stance with one leg ahead of the other, both feet facing forward. The feet constantly shift. The hands are held up close around the face.

Costume: Light boxer shorts, lace up arena boots, and 16 oz. (450 g) gloves (Special! boxing gloves subtract 2 points from all damage dealt).



Character Bonuses:

Add 3 to P.S.

Add 2 to P.E.

Add 1 to Spd.

Add 20 to S.D.C.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Escape Moves: Roll.

Basic Defenses: Dodge, Parry, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: None.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Power Punch, Quick-Jab (Special! Does only 1 point of damage).

Foot Attacks: None.

Special Attacks: None.

Holds/Locks: Press Defense (Special! A simple defense; when an opponent is looking to be too much trouble, just latch onto him so he can't punch you very hard. A bad thing to do against kick boxers and grapplers, but effective in the ring).

Weapon Skills: None.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: **Knock-Out** blows: does not need to declare a KO before the strike is rolled; if the roll falls within the KO (usually a natural 20) then the opponent is knocked cold; this even applies when anticipating! **Punch-Pulling:** on a called shot, may still perform Knock-Out and **Death-Blow** strikes, but only do half damage.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select one Body Hardening power; may be exchanged one on one for a physical skill.

Skills: Body Building, Athletics, Anticipation (new! see below).

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: None.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st KO on a natural 20, Critical Strike on a natural 20, +2 Strike, +2 Pull Punch.

2nd +2 Parry/Dodge, +1 Initiative.

3rd +2 Damage, +2 on Anticipation, +1 to Roll, +5 S.D.C.

4th +1 attack, +1 Strike.

5th KO on a natural 19-20, +2 Pull Punch, +1 Initiative.

6th May add the attack Knee, +1 Strike, Death Blow on a natural 20.

7th Critical Strike from behind or on a natural 19-20, +1 damage, +1 Parry/Dodge.

8th +1 attack, +2 Pull Punch, +5 S.D.C.

9th +1 Strike, +1 Parry/Dodge, KO on a natural 18, 19 or 20.

10th +1 damage, +2 Roll, select one additional Body Hardening power or physical skill.

11th +1 on Anticipation, +1 Strike.

12th KO on a natural 17, 18, 19 or 20, +1 Dodge/Parry.

13th +1 Strike, +1 damage, +5 S.D.C.

14th Death Blow on a natural 19 or 20, +1 on Initiative.

15th +1 attack, KO on a natural 16, 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Why study Pro Boxing?

It's a good, Western style that has more widespread publicity than any other type of fighting. It is great for overall fitness and build, and it does give decent self defense capabilities as well. Your average pro boxer is also tough as nails — altogether intimidating. If you want fancy kicking and grappling, look elsewhere. If you want a fast, simple way to KO someone, look no further.

Command Sambo (exclusive)

Entrance Requirements: P.S. 15, P.E. 14, P.P. 12, M.E. 14.

Skill Cost: 8 years (6 years secondary).

The Russians are never ones to miss out on developing their own style, and nothing represents their fighting philosophy better than **Sambo**. The Russians are a hard people. Sambo teaches these tough hombres how to use their genetically/culturally predisposed musculature and violent tendencies to the greatest effectiveness. Sambo is a combination of Judo, wrestling, competition Karate and everyday brutality.

A Sambo master can biff it out with the best of them, but he's in his element on the ground. Ultimately, the martial artist will tackle his opponent to the ground and either finish him off there or bind him into an eye-watering joint lock.

Sambo students are expected to be strong and enduring to pain. Training is very hard. Very, very hard. Very, very, **very...** you get the idea. Hundreds of squats, push ups, sit ups and chin ups every day turn the musculature into an armored shell, the bones into solid steel, and the body into a powerful bundle of fighting prowess. Taking a kick in the face is, of course, undesirable, but to these guys it's a small price to pay as they rush in and dismantle their foe.

Stance: Both feet fairly well spread and facing forward, the body low and head down, arms out ready to receive or tackle, or maybe holding knives.

Costume: Anything goes, from track suits to military dress to wrestling style lycra shorts.

Character Bonuses:

Add 4 to P.S.

Add 3 to P.E.

Add 20 to S.D.C.

Add 2 to M.A.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Auto-Roll, Breakfall.

Basic Defenses: Dodge, Parry, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack, Auto Parry/Attack!, Multiple Dodge, Auto Flip/Throw, Disarm.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Power Punch, Elbow, Palm Strike.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, Trip/Hook, Axe Kick.

Special Attacks: Body Flip/Throw (if you have access to Rifter #3, see the section on grappling and ground fighting for details on how to use Sambo. Yes, Sambo fighters are good ground fighters).

Holds/Locks: Elbow Lock, Head Lock, Wrist Lock.

Weapon Skills: W.P. Knife.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Pull Punch, Death Blow, KO Strikes, Jump/Leap Attacks, Critical Strike from behind.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select two from Body Hardening, and one Martial Art Technique; any of these may be traded for physical skills.

Skills: Body Building.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: Russian.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st Critical Strike on a natural 20, +1 Strike, +2 Pull Punch, +2 Roll/Breakfall.

2nd +2 damage, +1 Flip/Throw, +1 hand strikes.

3rd KO on a natural 20, +1 attack, +2 Initiative.

4th +2 Parry/Dodge, Death Blow on a natural 20, +2 Disarm.

5th +1 Flip/Throw, +2 Locks/Holds, +2 Roll, +2 damage.

6th Critical Strike on a natural 18, 19 or 20; +1 Parry.

7th +1 attack, +1 Strike, +5 S.D.C., +1 damage.

8th Death Blow on a natural 19 or 20, +1 Dodge.

9th +1 Flip/Throw, +2 damage.

10th KO on a natural 19 or 20, +2 Disarm.

11th +2 Holds/Locks, +1 foot strikes, +5 S.D.C.

12th +1 attack, Critical Flip/Throw.

13th Death Blow on a natural 18, 19 or 20; +1 damage.

14th +1 Strike, +1 Pull Punch, +2 Roll, Auto-Disarm!



15th +5 S.D.C., Death Blow from behind!

NOTE: This is a good martial art to introduce to **Rifts: Warlords of Russia**. I would recommend elite military O.C.C.s only, costing all Secondary Skills, half the O.C.C. Related Skills plus the 8 years skill cost mentioned above. The G.M. should probably think of another cost as well, like reduction in cybernetics or less starting equipment.

Why Study Sambo?

Because it's the combat training of the Russian military elite. There are hundreds of elements combined into one within Sambo, but wrestling features most strongly. To train in Sambo is also to develop a body carved out of granite, as well as a powerful fighting ability that can tackle most situations.

Savate

Entrance Requirements: P.P. 13, P.S. 10, M.A. 12.

Skill Cost: 7 years (5 years as a secondary).

Savate (Sav-A-tae) is actually a French style that was first developed in the early 1800's. Many speculate that it is derived from bull-fighting, but this is total hooey. It is just one of those martial arts that developed where there was innovation and spirit collected in the right amounts. Savate is actually listed as one of the top three martial arts to learn as a self defense. Though great flexibility is required, this flexibility comes very easily with enough constant training.

Savate masters are aggressive and effective, but also elegant at the same time. Devastating, sweeping kicks are the order of the day, with some close-in boxing style handwork to fill the gaps. No grappling is taught. Many may compare Savate to kick boxing, but the separation between the two is vast indeed. Savate is very upright, while kick boxers tend to sink low like a boxer. Savate is developed so the student can utilize the techniques in any situation, without having to warm up or sink into a ready stance. While many martial arts stress this point, Savate is especially good at it — a master could quite easily be standing at attention, and then crescent kick someone in the temple without moving his shoulders. Hence the great hip flexibility required.

Stance: Simple, narrow stance with the legs only shoulder width apart, one foot facing forward and the other facing out ready to step or kick. The forward hand is held out, while the back hand is held close to the torso for defense.

Costume: Any loose training clothing will suffice.

Character Bonuses

Add +3 to P.P.

Add +1 to P.E.

Add +5 to S.D.C.

Add +2 to Spd.

Add +2 to M.A.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Escape Moves: Roll, Maintain Balance.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Auto-Parry, Dodge.

Advanced Defenses: Circular Parry (Special! This is more often done with the feet than the hands), Disarm.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Elbow, Palm Strike.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Roundhouse, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Axe Kick, Reverse Turning Kick, Jump Kick, Jumping Reverse Turning Kick, Trip/Hook.

Special Attacks: Double Kick Technique (Special! Savate masters are so well trained they can kick twice in the air before landing again, similar to many flashier Kung Fu styles and Tae Kwon Do; once per melee round the character may, if he has won Initiative, perform any two kicks in a row, rolling to strike with one immediately after the other; the first kick gets full strike bonuses, while the second gets only half bonuses, rounding down).

Holds/Locks: Leg Lock, Elbow Lock (Special! If the opponent is on the ground, such as after a Sweep, either of these may be performed with the feet).

Weapon Skills: None.

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Jump/Leap, Critical Strike from behind, Death Blow, Knock-Out Strike, Pull Punch.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select one Martial Art Technique; may be traded for a physical skill if so desired.

Skills: Select either Gymnastics, Athletics, Fencing, Body Building (toning) or Aerobics (new! see below).

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: None.

Languages: French.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st Critical Strike on a natural roll of 20 and from behind, +1 Strike, +2 Parry.

2nd +2 Dodge, +1 Initiative.

3rd +1 attack, Multiple Dodge.

4th KO on a natural roll of 20, +1 Initiative.

5th Select one power from either Body Hardening or Martial Arts Techniques.

6th +1 attack, +2 Disarm, +1 Kick.

7th Critical Strike on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20; +1 Parry/Dodge.

8th +1 attack, +1 Holds/Locks.

9th +1 Disarm, +2 Initiative.

10th +1 attack, +1 Strike.

11th KO on a natural roll of 19 or 20; +1 Parry/Dodge.

12th +1 Kicks, +1 Parry/Dodge.

13th Death Blow on a natural roll of 20.

14th Select one power from Body Hardening or Martial Arts Techniques, +1 Initiative.

15th +1 attack, +1 Parry/Dodge.

Why study Savate?

For many reasons. It's very impressive, it's highly effective and it also has a strong moral background. Students are taught control and respect every step of the way. Another advantage is its relative obscurity — very few people expect to fight someone who has learned Savate.

Petjut Kilat Silat/Arnis

Entrance Requirements: P.P. 13, M.E. 10, P.E. 12.

Skill Cost: 8 years (6 years as a secondary).

Silat is the shortened name for the Filipino fighting style made famous by their whirling fighting sticks. In recent times, Silat has evolved into a modern style called Amis, which combines Filipino principles with (of all things) Spanish dagger and sword fighting. Silat is, essentially, a weapon based style,

though the reason for this is simple. The principle is that if you teach a student to use weapons, he will become more proficient with his hands and therefore with unarmed fighting. It's an interesting teaching technique that sees the masters of **Silat** become truly deadly warriors with blades, sticks and, of course, unarmed combat. Silat is characterized by the tearing and breaking techniques used.

Filipino stick fighting is much more common than people may think. Many Western martial arts schools have progressed to involve Silat principles in their own curriculum. Having worked with the sticks myself, I can tell you there is nothing more beautiful and simple. They give the student a firm understanding of how to judge distances, how to defend and how to engage an opponent. Hand-eye coordination is doubled with time, and soon the use of elbows and kicks as part of the stick fighting becomes second nature. The true beauty of Silat is that the weapons are so readily available — a pair of short sticks can

be a broom handle broken in half, a pool cue broken in half, two baseball bats, two lumps of wood off the ground, two pieces of pipe — whatever. And the transition between a stick and a knife or short sword is a very easy one. The fighting style is essentially the same, except one causes considerably more damage. Every type of weapon can be used in either hand equally well, and paired weapons can be combined to be a dagger and stick, a sword and stick, a sword and dagger - whatever. Sometimes just one weapon is used. Such is the versatility of Silat.

Students learn in a four step progressive pattern. First come the fundamentals. Then they learn *Sayaws* which are forms to teach the movements involved. Then comes *Buno* or grappling training, followed by *Sandatas*, weapons. Once all these things have been learned in basic, the true mastery comes from *Bunga*, free sparring with weapons.



The actual weapons training of **Silat** is called **Eskrima**, or Kali double stick fighting. Amis is much flashier and a little less brutal than Silat, though for purposes of role-playing, they are treated as the same style. Very few role-playing characters could go wrong using this martial art.

Stance: The stance is slightly lowered through bent knees and the practitioner leaning forward, ready to strike. Staying light and mobile is important for dodging and moving in close to grapple. The hands are kept close to the body to avoid them getting cut by the opponent.

Costume: Similar to the Kung Fu cotton outfit, with soft shoes. The clothing must be comfortable and free around the neck and wrists, but not so loose as to be entangling.

Character Bonuses:

Add 2 to P.P.

Add 2 to P.E.

Add 12 to S.D.C.

Add 4 to Spd.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Escape Moves: Roll, Maintain Balance.

Basic Defenses: Parry, Dodge, Auto-Parry.

Advanced Defenses: Combination Parry/Attack, Power Parry, Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Disarm.

Hand Attacks: Strike, Backhand, Elbow, Palm, Knife Hand, Forearm.

Foot Attacks: Kick, Snap Kick, Roundhouse, Trip/Hook, Axe Kick.

Special Attacks: Body Flip/Throw, Body **Block/Tackle**.

Holds/Locks: Wrist Lock, Elbow Lock, Neck Lock, Torso Hold.

Weapon Skills: W.P. Knife, W.P. Short Sword, W.P. Short Blunt, W.P. Paired (in all these weapons, and in any combination).

Special Katas: None.

Modifiers to Attack: Critical Strike from behind, **Knock-Out Strike**, **Pull Punch/Strike**, Death Blow; the Silat fighter can use all moves whether armed or unarmed - all the Throws, Locks, Holds, Disarms and Parry techniques can be used with paired weapons, a single weapon or with the bare hands.

Skills Included in Training

Martial Arts Powers: Select two abilities from Martial Arts Techniques or Body Hardening or Katas; these may be traded one to one for physical skills.

Skills: Select one physical skill.

Philosophical Training: None.

Cultural Skills: Select two cultural skills.

Languages: Tagalog.

Level Advancement Bonuses

1st Critical Strike on a natural 20 or from behind, +1 Strike, +2 Parry/Dodge.

2nd Add two levels to W.P. Short Blunt, +2 Maintain Balance.

3rd Add two levels to W.P. Knife, +1 Strike, +3 Pull Punch, Auto Body Flip/Throw.

4th +1 attack, +1 Parry.

5th +2 Flips/Throws, add two levels to W.P. Short Sword, Auto-Disarm.

6th +2 Locks/Holds, +2 damage.

7th +1 Parry/Dodge, +1 Strike, +2 Disarm.

8th Select one power from Body Hardening, Martial Art Techniques or Special Katas; Death Blow on a natural roll of 20.

9th Critical Strike on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20; +1 Maintain Balance.

10th +2 damage, add two levels to W.P. Short Blunt, Knife and Short Sword.

11th +3 Initiative, +2 Pull Punch, +2 Roll.

12th +2 Parry/Dodge, +1 Disarm.

13th Select one power from Body Hardening or Martial Art Techniques; KO on a natural roll of 20.

14th +2 attacks.

15th Death Blow need not be **declared!**, like a boxer's KO it occurs automatically on a natural roll of 20.

Why study Silat or Amis?

Because to learn Kali stick fighting, or Eskrima weapon techniques, is to become a highly proficient fighter in all circumstances, not just with weapons. This martial art is amongst the most complete available, teaching good techniques against all forms of attack, even multiple opponents. Silat teaches unarmed and armed fighting in equal levels of mastery, where as most other martial arts will teach these things separately and thus make it more difficult to be proficient in both.

Also See: In the **Rifter** #3 we were given a couple of extra styles that belong on this list. Wrestling is one, **Kalaripayit** (also known as just **Kalari**) is another.

Additional Physical Skills

Here are some optional, additional physical skills to add to **Palladium's** ever-growing list. These are skills most often taken by martial artists to supplement their combat training.

Aerobics

Basic, aerobic exercise. It may be actual "Aerobics" in a gym environment, or it may be home training with a skipping rope that gives a character this skill. Either way, the benefits are the same: enhanced health and fitness, as well as an improved figure.

Add +1 to P.E.

Add +1 to Spd.

Add 1D4 to P.B.

Anticipation

Special Skill Cost: 2 skills to select; 1 skill if the character has taken an Exclusive martial art.

This is a talent learned by many Karate point fighters. The idea is to hold back and wait for the opponent to strike, then "**out-speed**" him and strike before his blow lands. Literally, you anticipate the blow and strike first. Unfortunately, a lot of technique and power is lost when this method is employed. This is the classic boxing skill of jabbing to the face to throw the opponent off, or the **Bruce Lee** classic one-inch punch "way of the intercepting fist".

If the character with this skill declares a simultaneous attack in melee combat, he may negate his opponent's attack if he successfully strikes. That is, his opponent's attack doesn't count at all! The strike must be a Punch, Snap Kick or a simple weapon

Thrust. Also, there is no time to put any real force behind the strike, so no P.S. bonus applies to damage. See the rules for simultaneous attacks for details.

In learning anticipation, the character has probably taken a bit of a beating; add +1D4 to S.D.C.

If two characters with this skill fight, it cancels out and combat is resolved normally.

Dieting

Yes, this is a physical skill. To improve one's body, one must eat correctly. You are what you eat, after all (bad news for us junk food addicts). Many, many martial artists come to realize that they owe it to their bodies to eat correctly — training to be a prime fighter requires the correct food, and not eating that food can be counterproductive.

Add +1D4 Hit Points

Add +1 to P.E.

Add +1 to saving throws vs. poisons and toxins that are ingested, injected or inhaled.

Add +1 to P.B.

Kick Boxing

Kick boxing is a very common self defense form. Outside traditional Muay Tai, kick boxing is a simple martial art to learn. If a character takes the martial art form listed above, then it is assumed he has spent several years training to a competitive level. If, instead, the character takes this skill, it is because he has done maybe a few months or a year of casual training as a supplement to his usual martial art regime.

Add +1D8 to S.D.C.

Add +1 to P.E.

Add +1 to P.S.

May add the following strikes to the usual list of available hand to hand attacks: Roundhouse, Axe Kick, Elbow, Forearm, Knee.

Plyometrics

(May not be taken as a Secondary Skill)

This is the science of developing speed within muscles. It involves short bursts of using muscles in explosive repetitions against set resistances. For example, doing push-ups in which the trainee claps between each one, or sprinting and stopping as fast as possible over a distance of only 3-4 meters. This encourages the muscles to become quicker and more powerful — very useful for a dedicated fighter. Taking this skill represents doing at least four years of Plyometrics.

Add +2 to P.P.

Add +2 to Spd.

Add +2 to P.S.

Qi Gong

Pronounced “chi-gung.” This is an intensive, meditative breathing art practiced widely in China. Similar in many ways to Tai Chi, though far more focused on the gathering of Chi in the body and focusing that energy in beneficial ways. Qi Gong does not increase the positive Chi in the body, so much as it increases both positive *and* negative Chi. Truth be known, negative Chi is not always a bad thing — after all, everything is required in perfect balance, and Qi Gong, with regular use, will hone and perfect this balance. It is this balance of positive and negative that

can be seen, overall, as a positive thing. For game terms, however, consider a character with this skill to be a beacon of positive Chi.

Add +1 to all saving throws!

Double starting Chi.



Tai Chi

Tai Chi, like Yoga, has been adopted as an exercise. In fact, it is the world's most common martial art. In its entirety, it is actually a highly effective form (see Tai Chi Ch'uan in *Ninjas & Superspies*). When taken as a physical skill, it serves to better the practitioner through controlled breathing, balance, harmony, rhythm and coordination of movement.

Add +2D6 to base Chi.

Add +2 to Maintain Balance.

Add +1 to **Grabbing/Throwing** techniques.

Add +1 to Roll.

Add +1 to M.E. (learning to stay relaxed).

Yoga

A relaxed, slow, constant routine of stretching exercises. Beneficial no matter what martial art you do, or even if you just want to relax. By stretching and opening channels in the body, Yoga has been described as a massage for the inside of the body. A character with this skill will double his flexibility, and receives the following benefits:

Add +1 to P.P.

Add +2D6 to base Chi.

Add +1 to M.A.

Add +1 to Maintain Balance.

NOTE: See **Rifter** #3 for some great new martial arts, and an excellent treatise on new grappling rules. Kudos to Lee Casebolt.

Extra Martial Arts Powers

NOTE: Remember, also, that many exercises cross over cultures. The Kick Practice Body Hardening power would quite probably be taken by a Savate master, though it would have a different French name. Likewise a boxer (in a Hero setting) may take the Eight Horse Stomp from **Mystic China**. Depending on the style of game, Game Masters are free to allow and ban any combination of martial arts powers for these international arts. All of these martial arts, skills and techniques/powers should be considered *optional*, to be used only if they fit into your individual campaign.

Deception — Martial Art Technique

May also be taken as an Art of Invisibility.

Ninjutsu, Capoeira, Drunken Style Kung Fu and even Aikido will use feints and deceptive body movements to gain advantage over an opponent. Any martial art can incorporate deceptive **techniques**, if the instructor is willing to teach them (or even knows how). Deception is not necessarily a sinister thing — it's just another way of manipulating an opponent, and isn't that what all martial arts are about? A character with this power may use it at any time, at no cost in actions. He weaves the deceptions into his normal movements. By spending three (3) **Chi**, once per melee, he can force his opponent to make an attribute check vs. his M.E. (attempt to roll under it on a D20; 20 automatically fails). If the attribute check fails, the opponent has a -2 to dodge or parry any of the martial artist's techniques that round. More Chi must be spent and new attribute checks must be made each melee round. The martial artist may affect as many people as he is in hand to hand combat with, at multiple Chi costs.

Mandinga — Martial Art Technique

Strictly speaking, this is unique to Capoeira. However, it may be taken by any spiritual martial artist who has a deep connection to his martial art's background. Kung Fu mystics are a good example of people who may take this power. Muay Tai fighters might invoke a similar result with the cleansing rituals they perform before entering a bout.

Essentially, it revolves around the belief that the spirit of a great master in the martial art's history possesses and guides the practitioner. There are tales of old ladies hobbling into a Capoeira *Roda*, and then bursting into astronomical acrobatic movements before hobbling away again. Realistic speculation is that it's more a psychological phenomenon, in which belief above all else gives the body more energy and power. Whatever the case, the game effects are the **same**. First, the practitioner must have 3D6 minutes to meditate before combat. Then, at any time within the next hour, he/she may spend ten (10) Chi to invoke the ancestral spirit. This "possession" lasts indefinitely — to keep it active the practitioner must spend an additional one (1) point of Chi per melee round. The effect is to boost all Dodge and Strike rolls by +2, add one additional attack per melee round, and add +1 to all saving throws. These benefits fade away again once the power fades.

Reflex Training — Martial Art Technique

Bruce Lee made this popular by using wooden fighting dummies and (later, as his strength increased) metal practice targets. Reflex training is very simple and ancient, and any martial artist with the inclination might take the time to add this to his list of abilities. After years, or even just months of relaxed training, one's hand-eye speed can be doubled, boosting it to the subconscious level. This is a considerable edge to have. The benefits are +4 to Initiative, +1 to I.Q., +1 to Parry & Dodge, and the addition of the ability Combination **Parry/Attack**. As an option, if the character has redirected his reflex training to defensive capabilities only, he may ignore these benefits completely and instead add the ability Auto-Dodge to his list of combat moves.

Additional Hand to Hand Combat Rule (Optional)

I love the exchange of the Palladium combat system. But I have one complaint, and this is a complaint I have with ALL combat systems ever devised in the role-playing arena. Initiative.

I have been in enough training combat situations to understand that who gets to act first is more than simple luck (roll a D20). Sure, cybernetic devices, O.C.C. bonuses and mystic powers may boost your chances of acting first, but modern day martial artists don't have these benefits. What about experience, skill, agility, tactics? These are what wins one initiative in combat. To strike first you must size up your opponent, throw a few feints, change your footwork, look for an opening and then strike before he can react. If he does react, you must **out-skill** him until you land the blow.

Even in missile fire, skill is a more major contributor to initiative than luck. So here is my optional initiative system to put a little more spice into combat.

1. Start with the D20, then add all the usual bonuses for skill, O.C.C. and abilities. No surprises here. As always, highest goes first, lowest acts last and so on.

2. Everyone, in character generation, should find a bonus based on their I.Q. by comparing their attribute to the M.E. bonus chart. The resulting bonus is another flat Initiative addition. This is the tactical edge. All creatures add this bonus.

3. All characters get a further Initiative bonus based on their experience. I don't care how fast someone might be, the more experienced fighter has seen it all, knows the moves and can anticipate what the less experienced foe will do. So take the character's level and divide by three (3). Round all fractions down. This is the second addition (levels 1-2 = +0, levels 3-5 = +1, levels 6-8 = +2, levels 9-11 = +3, levels 12-14 = +4, level 15 = +5).

4. Then there are situation modifiers. The G.M. should be fairly casual with these — excessive number crunching during combat slows everything right down. Just remember these few simple modifiers and you'll find players more interested in developing tactics and strategies to gain every possible edge, beyond the simple "OK, I'll try to hit him." Copy this table and paper-clip it to your G.M. screen.

Situation Advantage	Initiative Modifier
Higher Ground	+2
Attacking from a Concealed Position	+4
Throwing a Feint (-2 to Strike roll)	+2
Superior Melee Weapon Reach	+2
Declared the Desire to attempt a Simultaneous Attack before Initiative was Rolled	+2

Situation	Disadvantage
Being Fired Upon	-3
Took a Critical Hit Last Melee Round	-3
In Melee, Opponent is Armed and You are Unarmed	-2

5. I would also recommend that the Game Master make those with the lowest Initiative declare their actions first, that way the Initiative winners can react to what the slower opponent is doing. This is how it works, after all. You see a guy draw back his hip to kick, and if you are faster than him, you can strike first, or wait and defend before finishing him off.

Chaos Earth™

By Kevin Siembieda

Introduction

I mentioned the ideas for **Chaos Earth™** several years ago. It's one of those ideas (like the original *Rifts® RPG*) that I have kicked around for years and years. In fact, I considered doing it as the very first dimension book for **Rifts®**, but never found the time to write it. A few years ago, Adam Chilson presented an idea that sounded very similar. Ironically, he didn't have a name for it. I suggested "Chaos Earth" as a possibility. In fact, he submitted a manuscript for what we were calling "Chaos Earth" back in 1995 (or maybe even 1994). I had some problems with it and he submitted an addendum for it a year or two later. All this time, Adam's manuscript and my own notes and ideas have languished unfinished but not forgotten. Never forgotten.

Ideas have kept percolating in my mind and I figured I better start writing things down. Whether I use any of Adam's manuscript or go completely with my own material I haven't yet decided (I'm leaning in the latter direction), but one way or another, **Chaos Earth™** will be a reality. Um, no pun intended, for you see, **Chaos Earth™** is an alternate reality. A parallel dimension. A splinter from the reality that is **Rifts®**.

Rifts®

Let's pause for a moment to get the proper picture. On *Rifts Earth* what should have been a tragic, but limited nuclear exchange, set into motion earth-shattering events that could never have been anticipated.

Imagine, if you will, throwing a stone into a quiet pond. One expects the stone to send ripples across the surface. The nuclear bombardment that sent millions of people to their graves caused such a "ripple" along the ley lines of South America.

Now imagine the ripples in that pond erupting into violent waves that batter the shore and create many more raging ripples, each more powerful than the last. Impossibly, somehow the ripples spread to the nearby lakes, then seas, then oceans, causing them to seethe with primordial fury, turning the waterways into swirling violence that spawns monstrous storms and shakes the very planet!

In the wake of the geometrically escalating violence, people perish in droves. Storms of rain, hail, lightning, and hurricane force winds rain down like the wrath of God, and monstrous "things" appear on the winds and ride the waves. To your horror, every life that is lost (human and animal) feeds the fury. More storms are spawned, the earth moves and splits open, mountains shift, the seas boil and churn, tidal waves higher than the tallest skyscrapers hammer the land, and cities crumble. The upheaval can only be considered an apocalyptic end of the world. It lasts for weeks.

When it subsides, unnatural weather still blankets the Earth, and human civilization has been wiped clean. Less than 30% of the human population has survived and half of them will perish within the next year. Millions more will perish during the "Dark Age" that follows.

That's basically what happened on *Rifts Earth*, except instead of a stone dropped into a pool of water, the limited nuclear exchange caused the regional ley lines to be filled with the Potential Psychic Energy (P.P.E.) of millions. That was followed a moment later by a second wave of P.P.E. from millions more atomized in the retaliatory response launched by the first country before it fell under the nuclear firestorm of its enemy.

Remember that the amount of Potential Psychic Energy is doubled at the moment of death, so when millions of people — say, as few as two million — were obliterated in the first bombardment, that number was multiplied by ten times (and that's conservative) in regards to the level of P.P.E. filling the regional ley lines. And this does not include the P.P.E. of the millions of pets and animals that also perished in that moment, easily tripling the amount of mystic energy unleashed in two massive waves.

Before the nuclear holocaust, the world's ley lines were little more than a silent trickle of unknown mystic energy that was barely **discernable** to those sensitive to the supernatural. Even with the powerful boost resulting from the planetary alignment, winter solstice and the hour of midnight, the ley lines were comparatively weak, although more powerful than they had been in 2000 years. The first wave of nuclear death caused the lines of energy to rage and overflow, effectively transforming the trickle

into a raging river of energy cascading over its banks and flooding the area for miles. The second wave, a moment later, caused the ley lines to literally explode! To erupt with energy much too great to contain.

The planetary alignment (pure coincidence or fate?) served to connect all the ley lines of the Earth, so when the regional lines could not contain the sudden swell of mystic energy, it functioned like a "trip circuit" sending the energy cascading along one circuit (i.e. ley line) after another.

This chain reaction had an instant and profound effect on nature. The unchecked psychic/mystic energy of the ley lines caused violent storms of unbelievable magnitude to appear across the globe. Storms greater than any hurricanes, tornadoes, or tidal waves ever recorded by man. Many the product of magic. In addition, earthquakes erupted along every fault-line on Earth and tidal waves rushed from the coastline to hundreds of miles inland. Billions perished in a world gone mad in a matter of hours. Each death fueled the ley lines, forcing them to erupt with energy beyond containment and fueling the primordial fury of nature.

As if this were not devastating enough, tears in space and time — dimensional "Rifts" — tore open at hundreds and hundreds of locations where two or more ley lines intersected. Places known as Ley Line Nexus junctions. Here, other dimensional energies and effects joined in shaking the already convulsing planet. Magic energies swirled unchecked and unleashed supernatural forces into our world.

This was the legendary Great Cataclysm. In its aftermath the Earth was transformed into something very different. Something alien. Someplace that is rare even in the infinite Megaverse. A portal to countless other worlds, dimensions and realities.

For decades — no one knows for certain how long the "Dark Age" lasted — many of these *Rifts* remained open, linked to alien worlds and supernatural domains. Many others opened and closed randomly. All too often, alien creatures and dark forces emerged. Some supernatural and monstrous, others as frail as human beings, only they were not human at all.

And so *Rifts Earth* was born. It would take an estimated three hundred years for the energies and anarchy to settle down enough for humankind to again begin to assert itself. Only now, humans share their planet with alien and supernatural beings, magic is real, and one can travel to the end of the universe by simply stepping through a "Rift." But this is the story of **Rifts®**. The fate of the place we call **Chaos Earth™**, is very different.

Chaos Earth™

Whether one regards the trigger of the Great Cataclysm on *Rifts Earth* to have been coincidence or the hand of fate, one must recognize that a nearly impossible string of events occurred to make it happen. The day was Winter Solstice. The hour, midnight. The amplified connecting matrix around the world, caused by a rare planetary alignment. All of which had the global network of ley lines linked, primed and flowing with levels of increased mystic energy that had not been seen in two thousand years. Only the deaths of millions in a single minute could have sent the ley lines into overdrive in a chain reaction that would transform the planet and the destiny of humankind. If any one of these elements had *not* been in place, the results would have been very different.

On the parallel world we will come to know as **Chaos Earth™**, the planets were aligned, the ley lines rippled with increased energy, but the limited nuclear exchange occurred a half hour before midnight — thirty scant minutes before the advent of the Winter Solstice and before the magical hour of midnight. While the life energy — the Potential Psychic Energy (P.P.E.) — of millions of lives flooded into the neighboring ley lines, the chain reaction that caused the transformation of *Rifts Earth* was much less severe (at least two-thirds less severe). However, civilization teeters on the brink of collapse nonetheless.

The limited nuclear exchange between a pair of South American countries apparently sparked a strange natural phenomenon. Lines of a previously undiscovered type of energy crisscross the Earth. It is a dimension warping energy that has brought worldwide havoc. It is the source of countless metaphysical and paranormal phenomena, a dramatic increase in psychic phenomena, strange dimensional anomalies, and the appearance of alien beings, monsters and even supernatural beings that appear to be the demons, gods and beasts of ancient myths and legend. Where two or more lines of energy intersect, space and time is sometimes torn apart to create a dimensional portal to alien worlds and dimensions.

The phenomenon defies conventional science and leads to a massive movement toward spiritualism, demon worship and the practice of magic.

A brief Geo-Political World Overview

Fifty years have passed since the initial "Chaos Event" occurred. Except for Germany and Russia, Europe and Asia have been plunged into a dark age.



The North American Coalition: Canada and the United States of America are stronger allies than ever, and arguably the crumbling, last bastion of advanced civilization. *Mexico* was the third member of this Coalition, but has struggled under the weight of crushing natural disasters and unprecedented supernatural activity with "vampires." Contact has recently been lost with the Mexican Government. The worst is feared.

The Wail of Mexico, second only to the Great Wall of China in its size and length, nears completion. Border Patrols composed of Mexican Coalition soldiers (following their last orders to the end) and US troops are on constant alert. Their express purpose: To keep *vampires* contained in Mexico and out of the United States, and to rescue "human" refugees and give them sanctuary in the States. The original plan was to contain and destroy, but with the near collapse of the Mexican Government, and an explosion in the vampire population 500 times greater than originally estimated, the situation is quickly turning from a suppression and rescue mission to containing and destroying the enemy.

Although a staunch ally from the very advent of the Chaos Event, the Government of Mexico was unofficially considered lost 20 years ago and had been operating as a shadow government for years. **The Imperial State of Mexico** splintered from the old government and is found at the horrid, slum city-state built on the ruins of Mexico City. It is practically an independent nation and an oasis of brutal civilization in a monster ravaged country. It is a growing militant power that has become a ruthless rogue state plundering all around them. It came into being as a result of the devastated Mexican Government's inability to help the survivors of the massive earthquakes that leveled 87% of Mexico City (and other surrounding places) and claimed an estimated 8.9 million lives! Left to fend for themselves as the world's nations struggled with their own crises, the self-proclaimed Imperial State of Mexico has risen.

Windsor (a part of Ontario, Canada) and Detroit (Michigan, USA) are no-man's lands that have been "nuked" in a futile attempt to stem the swell of demonic creatures that swarmed out of the many Rifts located in these two ravaged cities. They were the first cities to be decimated by their own government. "Sometimes one must amputate a limb to save the body." Both are surrounded by a "Coalition" of Armed Forces from both nations. The region is known as the *Demon Zone*, and is considered one of the most dangerous places in North America. Horrors from this Zone frequently spill into the surrounding region, making most of Lower Ontario, Lower Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and northern Illinois among the most dangerous places to live on the continent.

The Southern US, from the Ohio Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, is in a shambles. Where loss of communications and total chaos do not reign, martial law is in place. The root of the trouble stems from high levels of magic that seem to permeate the Ohio Valley region. Here movements toward spiritualism, shamanism and various types of "magic" are at their strongest, despite Government warnings and condemnations of such practices.

Texas is one of the strongholds of the US government and is practically a second seat in government and military power, second only to Washington DC (there has even been some discussion about moving the Capital to Texas).

The Montana, Utah, Wyoming Triumvirate (MUWT). These states have ceded from the Union of the United States to form an independent sovereign nation.

California and Nevada, devastated by earthquakes, fires and drought, and separated by the MUW Triumvirate, have been virtually cut off from the rest of the America and left to fend largely for themselves. Collapse of the cities' infrastructure has returned much of these states to desert. An estimated 50% of the population have been evacuated and relocated.

The Northern, Mid-Western and Northeastern United States and Southern and Eastern Canada remain the strongest parts of their respective countries. In a surprising act of solidarity (and survival), the Province of Quebec has become an anchor that has helped the rest of the nation hold on and maintain order under one central government.

The rest of the States and Provinces teeter on collapse.

Japan is an oasis of strength and civilization. A fortified marvel of technology and a testament to the human spirit. But they are also isolated and alone.

China. Little is (at least publicly) known about China and most of Asia. The Chinese government is rumored to be on the verge of collapse as they engage in a relentless war with beings from some alien world (actually **demons!**).

Communications have been lost with **India** and most of Africa.

Australia and New Zealand seemed to have survived the initial Chaos Event virtually unscathed. However, problems steadily increase and threaten both nations. They too, are isolated and alone.

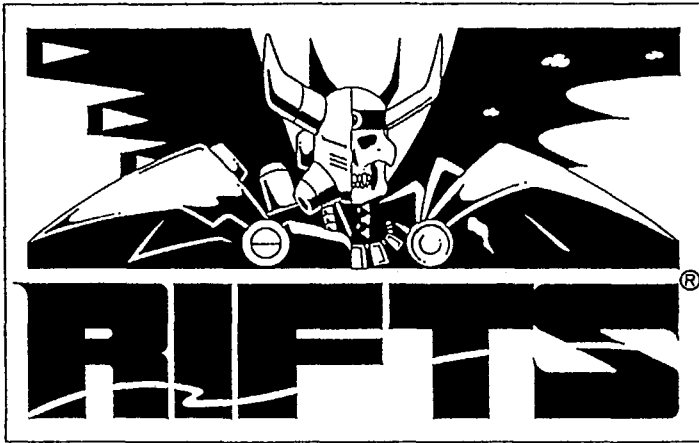
The basic premise: A spin on Rifts that asks the questions, What if civilization had not collapsed? How would human society have fared against the resurfacing of magic and the encroachment of supernatural and alien beings? This leads to other interesting questions. How will the world powers of the Golden Age of Man respond to threats from supernatural and demonic invaders and alien forces? Would they marshal an army of Glitter Boys, SAMAS, Crazies, Juicers, and other high-powered creations of **Cyberworks, Triax** and others?

And then there's humankind itself. How will it respond? Will people fear or embrace aspects of magic and the supernatural? Who will be corrupted by power and magic? Which cities or nations will adopt magic or swear allegiance to inhuman masters? What places will stand strong while others succumb to the chaos of a frightening and changing world? Will there be global war?

This is a glimpse of what might have been. A parallel universe to *Rifts Earth*. A world of super-science that comes into direct conflict with the impossible! With magic and the supernatural.

Note: I may serialize parts of **Chaos Earth™ in The Rifter™**. What do you think? Do you want to see more? Is this something you'd like to see in these pages?

Skelebots: The Mechanical Menace



Optional New Skelebots for Rifts®

By David Haendler

Sea Skelebots™

The great cannons of the pirate ship roared to life, coughing up clouds of black soot into the sea air. The CS patrol boat, hit by the broadside, nearly exploded as chunks of super-hot metal burst off of its hull. The high-tech, state-of-the-art gunship began to retreat, chased off by a vessel that looked like something out of an old pirate comic. The crew of the wooden ship gave up a great cheer as their enemy sailed off in defeat.

"The day is ours!" cried out the captain, proudly staggering out onto the deck. He was a large and saucy Deevil, with extravagant clothes, the scars of many a cataclysmic battle, and the stink of rum. The monster broke open a wine bottle with his teeth, and began to shower his crew with the liquor that flowed from within. "Did you see the way that they ran from us?!" he yelled proudly, tossing a generous splash of the wine in the general direction of his mouth. "If we received such a grand struggle from the mighty Coalition States, think how easily their more passive neighbors will fall! The seas belong to us!" Suddenly, there was the sound of glass breaking, and every one of the raucous crew became quiet. For no reason, the captain's bottle of wine had shattered, spilling the precious red liquid onto the filthy decks.

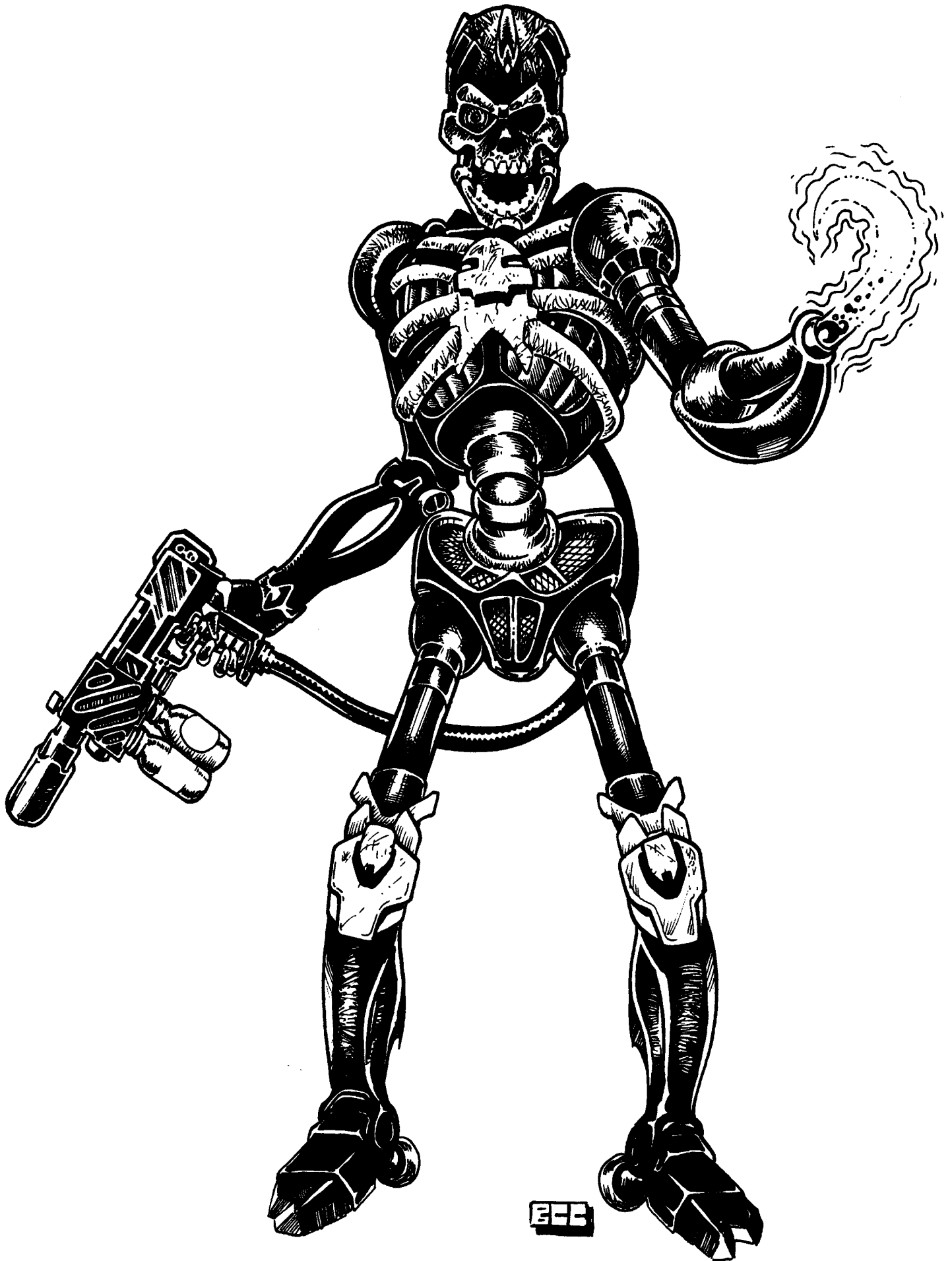
Another red liquid, equally precious, flowed out from the captain's midsection. The Deevil looked down at the blood, moaned, "There's a pain in my guts," and then slumped down dead. One of the crew members screamed.

A small army of metal monsters, looking like skeletons newly emerged from the briny deep, were scrambling up over the sides of the pirate vessel. Strands of seaweed hung down from their limbs, making them seem even more like the watery dead.

The invaders boasted a wide array of heavy weaponry. Their left arms ended not in hands, but in massive **Vibro-Blades**. Miniature air jets were on the sides of the blades, to propel the skeletal beings through the water. Splinters of wood caught in these blades were testament to the fact that the invaders had been hacking away at the ship's hull before boarding. A gauntlet of laser guns adorned the right forearm, and clutched in every right hand was a rail gun or Vibro-Saber. Furthermore, the robots even had flamethrowers built into their jaws, which they used to belch fire upon the pirates who were closest to them.

No quarter was asked or given in the fierce battle which followed. The pirates, generally dependant upon their ship's guns to protect them, were poorly armed and badly surprised. The demons put up a fight worthy of the greatest inhabitants of Hell, but were overwhelmed by the numbers and armaments of their mechanical foes. Just a few minutes later, the invaders were the only beings left standing on deck. They waited there until the damaged pirate vessel had sunk below the waves, and then began to swim back to the CS port from whence they had come.

Sea Skelebots, or "Buccaneer Skelebots" (as they are more commonly known) are a recent invention of the CS Navy. Several naval officers realized that many pirate vessels on the Great Lakes could not effectively protect themselves from boarding. The pirates, especially "retro" pirates with old-fashioned vessels, rarely bothered to form contingency plans for when they were boarded. The officers noticed that when they managed to get naval infantrymen onboard pirate ships, the pirates were badly outmatched. However, getting those troops onboard was a tricky matter. It was altogether too easy for the pirates to kill soldiers who were climbing the sides of their boats, and shooting down incoming jet pack soldiers was a relatively easy thing to do. The only other alternative was maneuvering the CS trans-





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Contributing authors will include *Kevin Siembida, Eric Wujcik, Wayne Breaux Jr., Jolly Blackburn* and other Palladium notables.

What Exactly is The Rifter™?

Well, flipping through this issue should give you a fairly good idea, but every issue will be different.

Really, there has never been anything like it.

The Rifter is a synthesis of a **sourcebook**, Game Master's guide, a magazine and talent show — a fan forum.

The Rifter™ is like a sourcebook because it will include a ton of role-playing source material (optional and official). This will include New O.C.C.s, **NPC** heroes, **NPC** villains, new powers and abilities, weapons, adventure settings, adventures and adventure ideas, and Hook, Line and Sinkers™.

The Rifter™ is like a G.M.'s guide because it will include special articles and tips on **role-playing**, how to handle common problems, how to build an adventure and so on.

The Rifter™ is like a magazine because it will come out four or five times a year (**we're** shooting for a regular quarterly release schedule), and because it will feature Palladium news, advertisements, serial articles and continuing features.

Most importantly, The Rifter™ is a forum for Palladium's Fans. At least half of each issue will be text and material taken (with permission) from the Web, as well as fan contributions made especially for **The Rifter™**. We get tons of fan **submissions** that are pretty good, but not good enough for publication as an entire sourcebook. In other cases, the submission is something clever and **cool**, but only a **few** pages long. There's lots of cool stuff on the Internet, but you must have a computer and Internet access, something a lot of fans just don't have.

The Rifter™ will reprint some of those "**Web-Works™**" allowing fans (and the world at large) to get a glimpse of their genius. It is one more avenue in which fans and professionals alike can share their visions of role-playing and the Palladium Megaverse with other fans. **It's** a chance to get published, get a little cash, get your name in lights (well, in print) and have fun.

This also means, more than any RPG publication ever **produced**, **The Rifter™** is yours. Yours to present and share ideas. Yours to help shape and mold. Yours to share.

Why call it The Rifter™? Because each issue will span the Palladium **Megaverse** of **games**, adventures and ideas. Each issue will publish features from people across the Web and beyond! But mainly because each and every one of us, from game **designer** and publisher, to Joe Gamer, traverses the Megaverse™ every time they read an RPG or play in a **role-playing** game. We travel the infinite realm of the imagination, hopping **from** one world to the next — building one world to the next. Time and space are meaningless in our imaginations as we *Rift* from one place and time to another.

**Palladium Books Inc.
Rifter Dept.**

**12455 Universal Drive
Taylor, MI 48180**

port directly next to the pirate ship so that the Dead Boys could jump on, and that exposed the transport to great danger.

The Sea Skelebots are Skelebots which are designed to take the place of human troops in such incidents. They typically come at the pirate vessel(s) from underwater, using their weapons to badly damage the enemy ships below the waterline before making their assault. Once the ship begins to sink, they then climb onboard the decks to massacre the pirate crew while the brigands are trying to evacuate. Sea Skelebots are a very new creation, but have already won the respect of the CS Naval Infantry.

Physically, Sea Skelebots are skinnier and more stream-lined than their dry-land equivalents. They have the same basic skeletal design, but are painted blue/green instead of black in order to blend in with the water. A light propulsion system similar to a jet pack is installed in the lower back, enabling the Sea Skelebots to swim easily, and a series of 4 grappling **hook/harpoon** guns emerge from their shoulders. The right forearm has a gauntlet of four linked underwater lasers built into it, and the right hand usually carries a Dead Man's Rail Gun or Vibro-Sword. A short range flame-thrower is built into the jaws for close combat against aquatic beasts which are unused to such weapons.

The left arm has no hand. Instead, a massive **Vibro-Harpoon** is built in below the elbow. This harpoon has a series of miniature air jets in it, to propel the point forward. It is this weapon which is used to sink enemy ships from beneath. The attacking Sea Skelebots cluster around the bottom of the pirate vessel, and thrust their harpoons into it until a leak has been sprung. On dry land, this weapon is *much* less effective.

Against pirates, Sea Skelebots have proven their worth. The robots are not widely enough known to be instantly recognized as CS 'bots, and have driven many a panicked marauder into thinking that the dead had risen up against him. There are several naval officers who love Sea Skelebots because, while sinking the enemy vessel, the robots do not damage the ship's contents as much as an artillery battle would. Thus, a pirate's precious booty can be easily recovered afterwards. Sometimes, this treasure makes it back to the Chi-Town treasuries, but more often it is used to fund wild parties for the officers and their men.

Against sea monsters, Sea Skelebots do an adequate job. While they are incapable of using special tactics against inhuman foes, they are still quite capable against these creatures. Most officers prefer to use Skelebots to dislodge monster nests, in order to keep from losing human lives. One famous story (which may or may not be true) amongst the CS Navy recounts the tale of several Buccaneer Skelebots who were swallowed whole by a Horned Demon-Fish which had been preying on a Coalition naval base. A few weeks later, the monster abruptly died during a battle against a CS submarine. When the Demon-Fish was dissected to discover the cause of its sudden death, the still-active Skelebots were found inside, hacking away at their enemy's intestines. Perhaps the greatest advantage that robots have over human soldiers is that the robots are not unnerved by even the largest and most frightening aquatic monsters.

Against land-based targets, Sea Skelebots fare poorly. They can not walk very well, as their joints were designed for optimal

swimming, and their most fearsome **weapon** is not much good out of the water. However, that is not a huge concern to the CS Navy. So what if their robots can't handle beach assaults and landings very well — that's what Naval Infantrymen are for!

So far, 400 Sea Skelebots have been constructed, at a facility near Chi-Town. Of these, about 60 have been destroyed, 240 are still in action (mostly in the Great Lakes), and 100 are in storage or undergoing repairs. While the Navy plans to build more, the Sea Skelebots have not proven themselves enough to justify the expense to Chi-Town. Once the robots have seen more combat experience and destroyed more enemies, then they will doubtless see mass-production.

Coalition Sea Skelebot

Model Type: FASSUAR-01

Class: Fully Automated Self-Sufficient Underwater Assault Robot

Crew: None; artificial intelligence.

M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) — 45 each

Hand (1) — 20

Vibro-Sword (1) — 55

* Propulsion Pack — 55

Grappling Hook Launchers (4) — 15 each

Legs (2) — 60 each

** Main Body — 110

*** Head — 70

* Destroying the Propulsion Pack will cut the **Skelebot's** swimming speed in half.

** Destroying the main body will destroy the Skelebot.

*** Destroying the head will usually (90% of the time) destroy the Skelebot. However, it sometimes loses control, blindly lashing out at anything that comes nearby until it is taken down. In this state, the Skelebot has no skills or bonuses, and will attack anything nearby, friend or foe.

The head is a difficult target to hit, especially on a moving target. Thus, it can only be hit when a character makes a "called shot," and even then the attacker is -2 to strike.

Speed

Running: Maximum speed of 20 **mph** (32 km) on land. Note that this does not tire out the Skelebot in any way.

Underwater Propulsion: Maximum speed of 50 **mph** (80 km) while the propulsion pack is activated. The propulsion pack must be shut down for 1 hour every 6 hours of use, so that the engines can cool down.

Underwater Depth: The Skelebot can withstand pressures of up to 4000 feet (1220 m). There is no pilot, and the robot can not get the bends.

Statistical Data

Height: 7 feet (2.1 m)

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m)

Length: 2 feet (0.6 m)

Weight: 312 **lbs** (140.4 kg)

Physical Strength: Equal to a P.S. 26

Cargo: None

Power System: Nuclear, average energy life of 6 years.

Weapon Systems

1. Vibro-Harpoon: The Vibro-Harpoon is the main weapon of the Sea Skelebots. It is a very large Vibro-weapon, with min-

aturized, very powerful air jets built into it. In the water, the Skelebot may turn on those jets to lunge forward up to 6 feet in a powerful thrusting attack. Naturally, this attack can not be performed when out of the water.

Primary Purpose: Anti-Ship

Secondary Purpose: Assault

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. on a normal attack, 6D6 M.D. on a Power Lunge (takes two attacks and can only be done underwater).

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Payload: Unlimited

2. Flame-Thrower: A small, short-range plasma generator is built into the jaws of the Sea Skelebots, allowing them to belch flames. This weapon was designed for use against water monsters which may be vulnerable to flames. However, the fact that it is only effective on land diminishes its practicality greatly. Still, the weapon has proven most useful against pirates and against sea monsters which venture up onto dry land.

Primary Purpose: Anti-Monster

Secondary Purpose: Defense

Mega-Damage: A flame belch does 4D6 M.D. to all beings within range, and has a 70% chance of setting combustibles on fire.

Range: 8 feet (2.4 m)

Rate of Attack: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Payload: There is enough fuel for 20 flame attacks.

3. Laser Gauntlet: A gauntlet of four light, blue-green lasers is built on the right forearm. It is designed for engaging foes, both above and below water, who are out of range of the Skelebot's other weapons. Individually the lasers do very little damage, but they are devastating when fired in a combined blast.

Primary Purpose: Assault

Secondary Purpose: Defense

Mega-Damage: 1D6 M.D. per laser fired. All of them may be fired in tandem at the same target for 4D6 M.D.

Range: 2000 feet (610 m)

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Payload: Unlimited

4. Grappling Hook Guns (4): Four grappling hook launchers have been placed in the shoulders of the Skelebot. While they are designed for climbing up the sides of enemy ships or latching onto enemy ships which are trying to flee, in an emergency they can be used as weapons. It takes one melee action to retract the hooks after they have been fired.

Primary Purpose: Climbing

Secondary Purpose: Defense

Mega-Damage: 1D4 M.D. per hook fired.

Range: 200 feet (61 m)

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Payload: Four, but the hooks may be pulled back to be fired again.

5. Other Weapons: The Skelebot may use any other weapon which can be held and fired with only one hand. They are often issued Dead Man's Rail Guns or Vibro-Sabers.

6. Hand to Hand Combat: Rather than use a weapon, the Sea Skelebot may engage in hand to hand combat. Their programming gives them the equivalent of Hand to Hand: Expert, with five attacks per melee.

Damage:

Restrained Punch — 4D6 S.D.C.

Full Strength Punch — 1D6 M.D.

Power Punch — 2D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Kick — 2D6 M.D.

Body Block — 1D4 M.D.

Head Butt — 1D4 M.D.

Bonuses: Same as a standard Skelebot.

7. Programming and Skills: Same as the standard Skelebot.

Lurker Drones

Paul waited anxiously in line at the **Lazlo** bookstore, clutching his precious copy of *Understanding Alien Races* to his chest. The author of the book, the famous D-Bee scholar **Werzen Tutells**, was signing copies today. Paul had been waiting months for this glorious occasion. He loved reading about alien races, he loved **Tutells'** writing style, and he loved hearing the great man speak. The line inched forward, until Paul was face to face with his idol.

Tutells was a perpetually jovial D-Bee dressed in bright orange robes from his planet. He had green, flabby skin, a short "Mohawk" of white hair, and a little white goatee. One of his eyes had been replaced with a cybernetic one made of plastic and red glass, and both of his three-fingered hands had been replaced with metal ones after he had accidentally touched a diseased mutate during a trip to Center. He smiled as he signed Paul's book.

Still, despite the **friendly** demeanor of the fellow, Paul felt anxious. His skin was clammy and cold, and he was having trouble breathing. Voices... terrible, mechanical voices... were echoing in the back of his **skull**, and a sound not unlike modem noise was ringing in his ears. Suddenly, the noises stopped, and he heard, "Target Werzen Tutells identified," with horrible clarity. Paul's body lurched forward, as the world went black.

When his sight and mind returned to him, Paul was standing over the bloody corpse of his idol, up to his elbows in gore. The security guards were lying on their backs, sizeable scorch marks in their armor. Bookcases were tipped over, people were fleeing in horror, and screams filled the air.

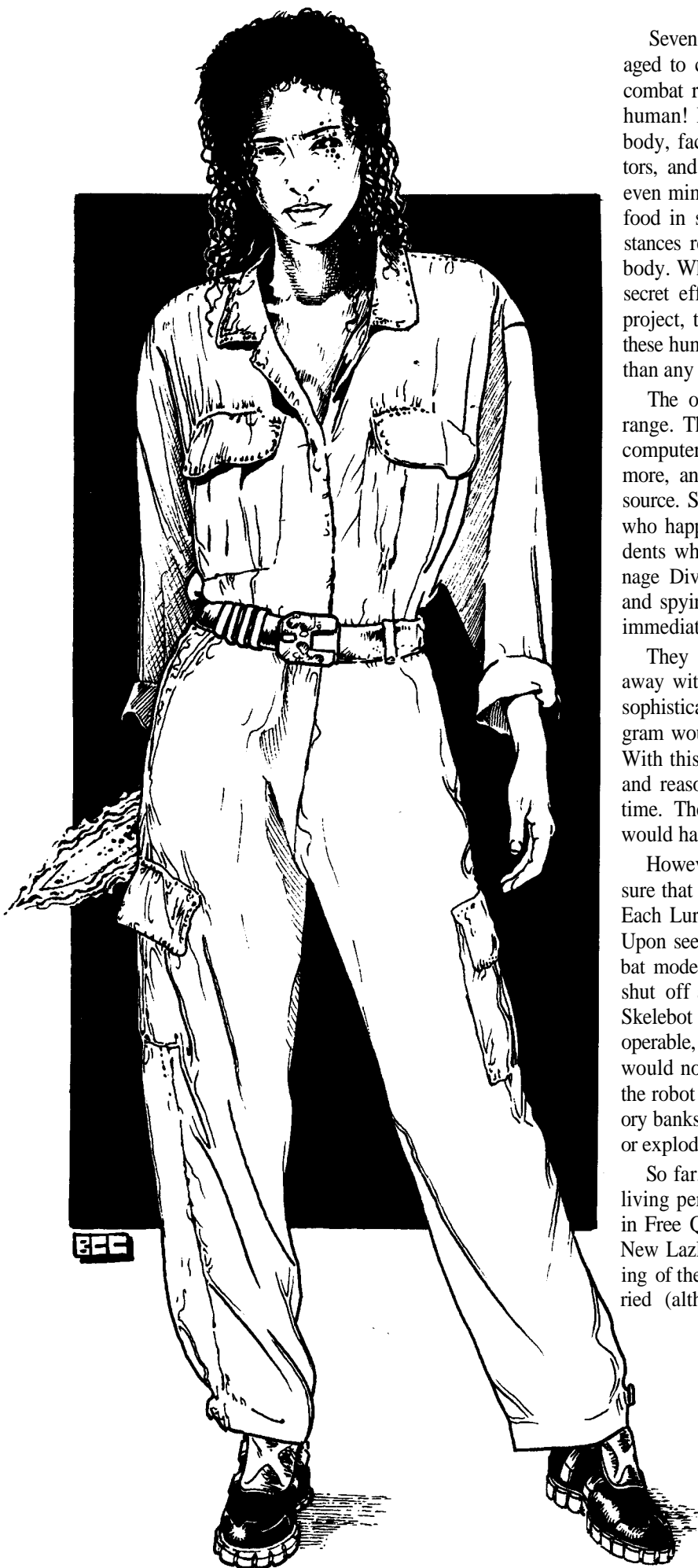
"**W-what** have I done?" gagged Paul. He looked down at his arms, and saw large, deep rips in the flesh. Underneath the blood, he saw sparking circuitry and metal bones.

Suddenly, more security guards began to charge in through the bookstore door. "Threat class 4," said the voice in Paul's head, and suddenly an energy weapon ripped through the skin of his palm. **Instinctively**, he opened fire on his attackers, tearing them to shreds.

"What am I?" **Paul** screamed, as he looked down at the gun in his hand. Suddenly, the voice spoke again.

"Final ignition countdown... 10... 9... 8... 7..."

The Lurker Drones are the masterpiece of Dr. **Eram** Fingal, a professor at the **Chi-Town** University. During his spare time, Fingal liked to tinker around with robot designs, trying to design the perfect infiltration and assassination 'bot. Whenever he found a design that he thought was workable, he'd pay some of his more promising students to help him build a prototype. Most of these robots, while workable, were disappointing, and were of a lower grade than the combat robots already in the field.



Seven years of hard work finally paid off when Fingal managed to create a prototype of the Lurker Drone, a very special combat robot. On the outside, the drones appeared completely human! Fake skin similar to those used in cyborgs covered the body, facial features were animated by miniature gears and motors, and a few weapons were even built in. The robot could even mimic bodily functions. It could eat and drink, storing the food in special compartments. It could turn the food into substances resembling urine and feces, and then expel it from the body. When cut, the robot bled, scabbed, and healed. Due to the secret efforts of one mischievous student who worked on the project, the thing could even fart and belch. Yet, despite all of these human features, the robot was stronger, faster, and tougher than any mortal man.

The only real problem that the construct had was its low range. The remote controls which operated it were as big as a computer console, and had a range of only a few miles. Any more, and the radio waves could be easily traced back to the source. Still, the Lurker was a success. Fingal sold it to the CS, who happily funded his retirement (and offered jobs to all students who had worked on the project). The Coalition's Espionage Division realized what a powerful tool for assassination and spying they now possessed, and wished to capitalize on it immediately.

They modified the robot's electronic brain, wanting to do away with the need for a controller. After much work, a fairly sophisticated AI program was created for the Lurkers. This program would simulate emotions, memories, and social behavior. With this program, a Lurker could seem like a perfectly normal and reasonable member of society, for an indefinite amount of time. They would not even know that they were robots, and would have no knowledge of their powers or weapons!

However, the CS scientists did put in some controls to make sure that the robots would serve well as assassination machines. Each Lurker would have an ultimate target programmed into it. Upon seeing this target, the drone would switch over into combat mode. During this time, its conscious, feeling mind would shut off and a set of programming more similar to that of a Skelebot would take over. When the combat programming was operable, the robot would know its powers and its weapons, and would not hesitate to use them. Once the target was destroyed, the robot would either report back to Chi-Town (where its memory banks would be downloaded for any interesting information) or explode (in case capture seemed imminent).

So far, 16 Lurker Drones have been built. At present, 10 are living perfectly normal, mundane lives in human society (3 are in Free Quebec, 2 are in Lazlo, 4 are in Tolkeen, and 1 is in New Lazlo). They believe that they are human, and know nothing of their true natures. A few of them have even gotten married (although they are impotent), leading the scientists to

wonder about how well a Lurker model designed for seduction/assassination would work. Four Lurkers have come into contact with their targets and killed them. 2 Lurkers have become non-functional, due to a malfunction in their computer brains. The CS doesn't know where these rogue 'bots are, and plans to **find** them as quickly as possible.

Emperor Prosek knows about the Lurker Drone project. While he thinks that it is too expensive to use often, he is very much amused by the concept. The elder Prosek likes the general idea, and wants to send robotic assassins after Erin Tarn and certain military bigwigs of Free Quebec and Tolkeen. His son is more impressed by the horrific image that the Lurker **'bots** produce. He thinks that a rash of "average citizens" going on kamikaze rampages in downtown Free Quebec and Tolkeen might be just the thing to badly demoralize the average enemy citizen and speed up the end of the war. Right now, the Lurker Drone project only has the budget and facilities to produce 16 drones a year, but this number may soon rise drastically. Furthermore, new and updated models are being worked on. Lurker Drones that resemble D-Bees, Lurker Drones modeled after actual people, and Lurker Drones that are more... anatomically correct, are all on the drawing board.

Coalition Lurker Drone

Model Type: FASSAER-02

Class: Fully Automated Self-Sufficient Assassination/Espionage Robot

Crew: None; artificial intelligence

M.D.C. by Location:

Hands (2) — 12 each

Arms (2) — 30 each

Laser Palm (1) — 15

Wrist Blade (1) — 9

Legs (2) — 50 each

* Skin Covering — 50 S.D.C., A.R. 11

** Head (1) — 45

** Main Body — 90

* The skin covering must be destroyed to expose the inner robotic workings. The revelation that this being is a robot has a Horror Factor of 12.

** Destroying either of these causes the robot to explode, doing 1D4x10 M.D. to a 15 foot (4.6 m) radius.

Attributes: The numbers before the slashes indicate the robot's attributes in standard mode, and the numbers after the slashes indicate its attributes in combat mode. I.Q.: 3D6/Special, M.A.: 3D6/3, M.E.: 3D6/Special, P.S.: 12 +1D6/25, P.P.: 8 +2D4/20, P.E.: 12 +1D6/30, P.B.: 8 +2D4/Same, Spd.: 12 +1D6/30.

Speed

Running: By Spd attribute in standard mode, or up to 120 mph (192 km) in combat mode.

Leaping: Up to 3 feet (0.9 m) in standard mode, or 6 feet (1.8 m) in combat mode.

Flying: None

Range: The nuclear power pack gives the robot approximately 10 years of life. This may be shortened on the newer models, as the robots don't need that much time to complete their objective.

Underwater Capabilities: None. The robot can't swim and is programmed to avoid going into large bodies of water.

Statistical Data

Height: 5.5 to 6 feet (1.67-1.8 m)

Width: 2.5 feet (.76 m)

Length: 1.5 to 2 feet (0.46-0.6 m)

Weight: About 200 lbs (90 kg)

Physical Strength: See above.

Cargo: None

Power System: Nuclear, average energy life is 10 years.

Black Market Cost: Not available.

Weapon Systems

1. Palm Laser: When in combat mode, the robot may pull a small laser rod out of its right palm to be used in battle. To the untrained observer, it looks like he simply pulled the gun out of his sleeve.

Primary Purpose: Assassination

Secondary Purpose: Defense

Mega-Damage: 2D4 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Effective Range: 1200 feet (366 m)

Payload: Infinite, linked to nuclear power pack.

2. Vibro-Knife: When in combat mode, the robot may pull a six-inch stiletto with **Vibro-capabilities** out of its left wrist to be used in battle. To the untrained observer, it looks like he simply pulled the knife out of his sleeve. The robot often shoves the blade up its intended victim's nose or into the victim's throat as its first attack.

Primary Purpose: Assassination

Secondary Purpose: Assault

Mega-Damage: 1D6 M.D.

Rate of Attack: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Payload: Not applicable.

3. Other Weapons: The robot is skilled with a wide variety of weapons, and may use other guns retrieved from dead security guards or enemies. The Lurker's targets are usually **unarmored**, so it is equipped with only light weaponry. The computer AI will recognize if the target is tough enough to withstand the built-in weapons, and will take steps to arm itself **appropriately**.

4. Hand to Hand Combat: In an emergency, the Lurker can try to overwhelm its foes with its bare hands. In combat mode, the 'bot gets five attacks per melee and the equivalent of Hand to Hand: Expert.

Damage:

Restrained Punch — 2D6 S.D.

Full Strength Punch — 1D4 M.D.

Power Punch — 2D4 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Kick — 1D6 M.D.

Body Block — 1D4 M.D.

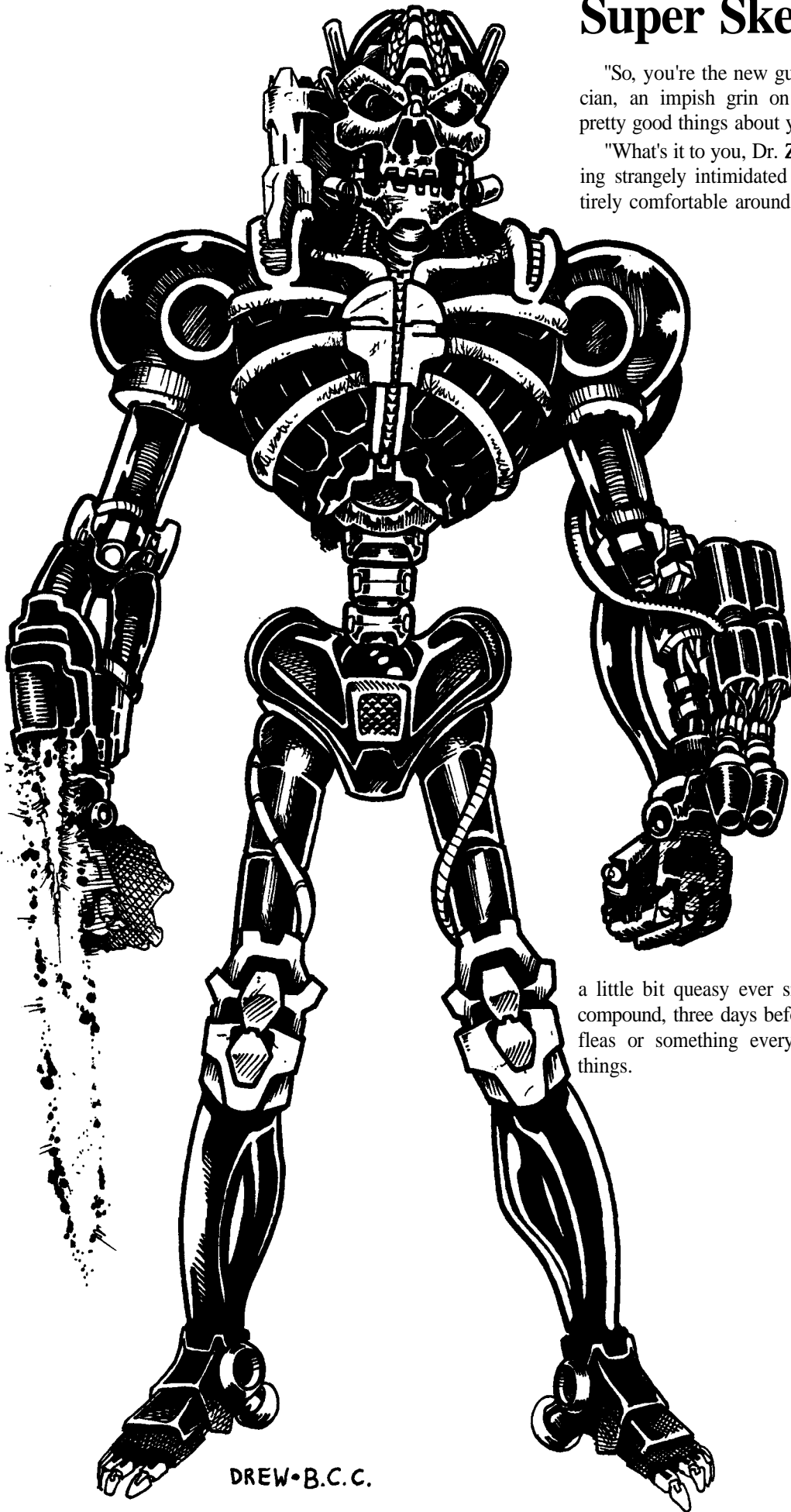
Head Butt — 1D4 M.D.

5. Skills, Sensors, Bonuses, and Programming: When in combat mode, the Lurker gets all of the bonuses, skills, sensors, and programming of a standard Skelebot. In standard mode, it has the skills and senses of an ordinary person. It is possible, although unlikely, for a Lurker Drone to learn combat skills in standard mode.

Super Skelebots™

"So, you're the new guy?" asked the mutant monkey technician, an impish grin on his ape-like face. "I've heard some pretty good things about you."

"What's it to you, Dr. Zaius?" asked the young scientist, feeling strangely intimidated by the mutant. He had never felt entirely comfortable around mutant animals, and had been feeling



a little bit queasy ever since he had arrived at the Lone Star compound, three days before. He kept on thinking that he'd get fleas or something every time he touched one of the damn things.

DREW•B.C.C.

The monkey-man broke out into laughter. "So **you've** seen that movie, too! I thought they only showed it to us!"

"You've seen a Pre-Rifts film?" asked the scientist. It seemed wrong that this sub-human creature would have seen technologies forbidden to most human citizens of the Coalition States.

"Don't get your shorts in a twist," chuckled the monkey. "It's just a movie. Anyway, seeing as how you are the new guy, I'm going to treat you to a real show."

"What do you mean?"

"Behold... the **Super-Skelebot!**" said the monkey, pressing a button on his computer console. An electric motor activated in the laboratory, and an iron partition began to slide up, revealing a window made of bullet-proof glass. Behind that window, in a stark little room, was a Skelebot. It was larger and wider than average Skelebots, and had different weapon systems, but there wasn't anything fundamentally different or exciting about the robot.

"This is a real show?" asked the scientist. "I'm sure it's tough enough, but what's the big deal? It just looks like another robot to me."

"Just keep watching," chuckled the monkey impudently.

Just as the young scientist opened his mouth to yell at the mutant, the Skelebot split open. Inside, there was a bizarre, Giger-esque melding of flesh and metal and circuitry. Slime, blood, and oil pulsed out from thick veins, and churning organs worked alongside whirring motors and servos. A large, fleshy sac split open, spilling gallons of slime out onto the floor. And then, it began to emerge. The organs came first, pushed out of some inner womb. The machinery, working at unbelievable speeds, knitted a complex network of metal and armor around it. Blood and sparks spurted together, and the glass window was spattered with unwholesome fluids. A few moments later, an entire Skelebot, exactly the same as the first one, had been produced. As the "mother" robot sealed itself back up, the "baby" Skelebot, covered in gore, stood up.

"**Sorta neat, isn't it, newbie?**" asked the monkey.

The young scientist could provide no immediate answer. He was on his hands and knees, coughing up his lunch.

The Skelebots are CS weapons that have long fascinated Dr. Bradford. He has a soft spot in his heart for the metal monsters, for they are relentless, merciless, and unforgiving... perfect defenders of the Coalition States. He has been interested in making a newer, better model for a long time, and recently managed to create one, when the arrival of some very competent assistants freed up a large block of his time.

At first, Bradford fiddled around with nanotechnology, trying to create a robot made up entirely of tiny mechanical "cells." However, this proved to be an expensive failure, as the nano-bots were too hard to engineer and the electronic brain was almost impossible to program. The **Nano-Skelebot** prototype, a clumsy, malfunctioning thing with a body the consistency of clay, was deactivated and put into storage, never to be seen again.

Bradford, not at all discouraged by this initial failure, moved on to a new design. This Super Skelebot was a **bizarre** hybrid of genetically engineered flesh and advanced cyborg systems. As Bradford and his assistants were far more skilled with genetics and bionics than they were within the field of nano-tech, this de-

sign worked out far better, and six working prototypes were built, at enormous cost.

On the outside, the **Super-Skelebots** look like normal Coalition robot soldiers. They have an armor casing similar to that of the new-style Skelebot, except that it has a much broader torso and limbs, and is a couple of feet taller. A large Vibro-Sword is built into the right forearm, and a particle beam blaster is built into the left forearm. A heavy rail gun is built onto the right shoulder, and an advanced jet pack is on the back.

Organic organs and muscles, very similar to those of the Kill Hounds, are intertwined with networks of bionic control systems and sensors. No robotic power sources were built into the robots (except for internal **E-Clips** for the energy weapons). Instead, they rely on the flesh of their fallen victims and internal sugar capsules (for times when enemies are scarce) for energy. With enough food, a Super-Skelebot can live for decades before its organic components wear out. They can even heal from wounds (at the standard, human rate of **healing**)! Their sensors, skill programs, and bonuses are the same as those of the standard Skelebot.

By far the greatest of the Super Skelebot's features is their ability to reproduce. A highly miniaturized robotics plant was built into their hips, along with genetically engineered reproductive tissues. Every two months, a Super-Skelebot in good condition can give birth to a clone of itself, after ingesting approximately 800 lbs (360 kg) of computer parts, Mega-Damage metals, and proteins for its reproductive machinery to retool into a fully grown clone. Dr. Bradford programmed the robots to cannibalize their fallen brethren, both to keep this technology from falling into enemy hands and to speed up the birthing process. The "birth" takes 1D4+2 minutes, during which time the Super-Skelebot is very vulnerable and open to attack. They can take no combat actions, and have half their normal M.D.C. while reproducing, and therefore are programmed to do this only in territory considered to be safe.

The Super-Skelebots are top secret so far. Bradford has told Emperor Prosek that he is working on a new, partly biological Skelebot, but has not told him what the things are capable of or how far along in their production he really is. There are currently 48 Super-Skelebots at Lone Star (they've been reproducing). The robots are currently undergoing testing, and are passing or exceeding all expectations. Although rumors are beginning to trickle out about the things, these rumors are dismissed as wild speculation.

Coalition Super Skelebot

Model Type: EGBS-02

Class: Experimental Genetic/Bionic Soldier

Crew: None; artificial intelligence

M.D.C. by Location:

Hands (2) — 38 each

Forearm Blaster (1) — 45

Vibro-Sword (1) — 30

Arms (2) — 70 each

Shoulder-Mounted Rail Gun (1) — 65

Legs (2) — 130 each

Jet Pack (1) — 100

* Head (1) — 90

* Main Body (1) — 210

* Destroying this will destroy the Super-Skelebot.

Speed

Running: 100 mph (160 km) maximum. Note that the **Super-Skelebot** does need to rest occasionally. After traveling **100 miles (160 km)**, the robot will automatically rest for half an hour.

Leaping: Can jump 8 feet (2.4 m) high or across, but generally uses the jet pack for aerial travel instead of their legs.

Flying: With the jet pack, **Super-Skelebots** can fly at a maximum speed of 190 mph (304 km) and a maximum altitude of 1000 feet (305 m). The jet pack runs on **E-Clips**, with one clip providing power for 6 hours of flight.

Range: The Super-Skelebot has an unlimited range, and a projected maximum life span of 40 years. However, their requirement of E-Clips for their weapons and food for their organic parts may require the robots to stay near CS territory or bases, as scavenging doesn't always yield enough.

Underwater: Super-Skelebots have a maximum depth tolerance of 500 feet (152 m). Their organic parts need oxygen, and their built-in air tank only provides one hour of air. Furthermore, they may get the bends if they come up too fast. Dr. Bradford did not design these with the CS Navy in mind.

Statistical Data

Height: 8.5 feet (2.59 m)

Width: 4.5 feet (1.37 m)

Length: 4 feet (1.2 m)

Weight: 510 lbs (230 kg; more when internally storing metal to be used in reproduction).

Physical Strength: Equal to a P.S. 35.

Cargo: None

Power System: Metabolism. Requires one good meal (meat only) per day. Sugar capsules built into them allow them to go without food for up to a week, but this is not a good idea and may shorten the robot's life span.

Black Market Cost: Not available! Right now, the Black Market thinks of the Super Skelebot as some kind of mythical boogey-man.

Weapon Systems

1. Forearm Blaster: This devastating weapon is made for short-range combat. It operates off of an **E-Clip** which is snapped into the forearm. While deadly, the Forearm Blaster has a low range and a low payload.

Primary Purpose: Assault

Secondary Purpose: **Anti-robot/Anti-supernatural**

Mega-Damage: 5D6 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Effective Range: 950 feet (290 m)

Payload: One clip provides ammo for 6 blasts.

2. Vibro-Sword: This weapon for close combat is built into the forearm. It can be pulled back into the arm, but is usually left out.

Primary Purpose: Defense

Secondary Purpose: Anti-personnel

Mega-Damage: 2D6 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Equal to the number of hand to hand attacks.

Reach: The sword is 2 feet (0.6 m) long.

Payload: Not applicable.

3. Shoulder-Mounted Rail Gun: This powerful and very accurate weapon is used to take out targets who are far away or

well armored. The Super-Skelebot can get ammo for this gun in one of two ways. Normal clips of rail gun ammo can fit into it, or the Super-Skelebot can eat chunks of Mega-Damage metal, and internally convert them into ammo. For every pound of metal eaten, 5 rounds can be gleaned. Furthermore, an E-Clip is needed to power the electro-magnets in the gun.

Primary Purpose: **Anti-robot/Anti-supernatural**

Secondary Purpose: Assault

Mega-Damage: 1D4x10 +20 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Can only be fired once per melee. After being fired, it takes **15** seconds to charge up for another shot.

Range: 6000 feet (1830 m)

Payload: The clip holds 20 rounds.

4. Handheld Weapons: The Super-Skelebot is familiar with all hand weapons used by the CS. They usually carry **CTT-P40** Particle Beam Cannons or C-200 "Dead Man's" Rail Guns to supplement their already considerable weapon systems.

5. Hand to Hand Combat: The Super-Skelebot will engage in hand to hand combat when its ammunition is gone or its weapons are broken, but resorts to fisticuffs only as a last resort. Gets 5 attacks per melee and is equal to Hand to Hand: Expert.

Damage:

Restrained Punch — 1D4x10 +10 S.D.C.

Full Strength Punch — 2D4 M.D.

Power Punch — 4D4 M.D., but counts as 2 attacks.

Kick — 2D6 M.D.

Body Block — 2D4 M.D.

Head Butt — 1D6 M.D.

6. Programming and Skills: Same as the standard Skelebot.

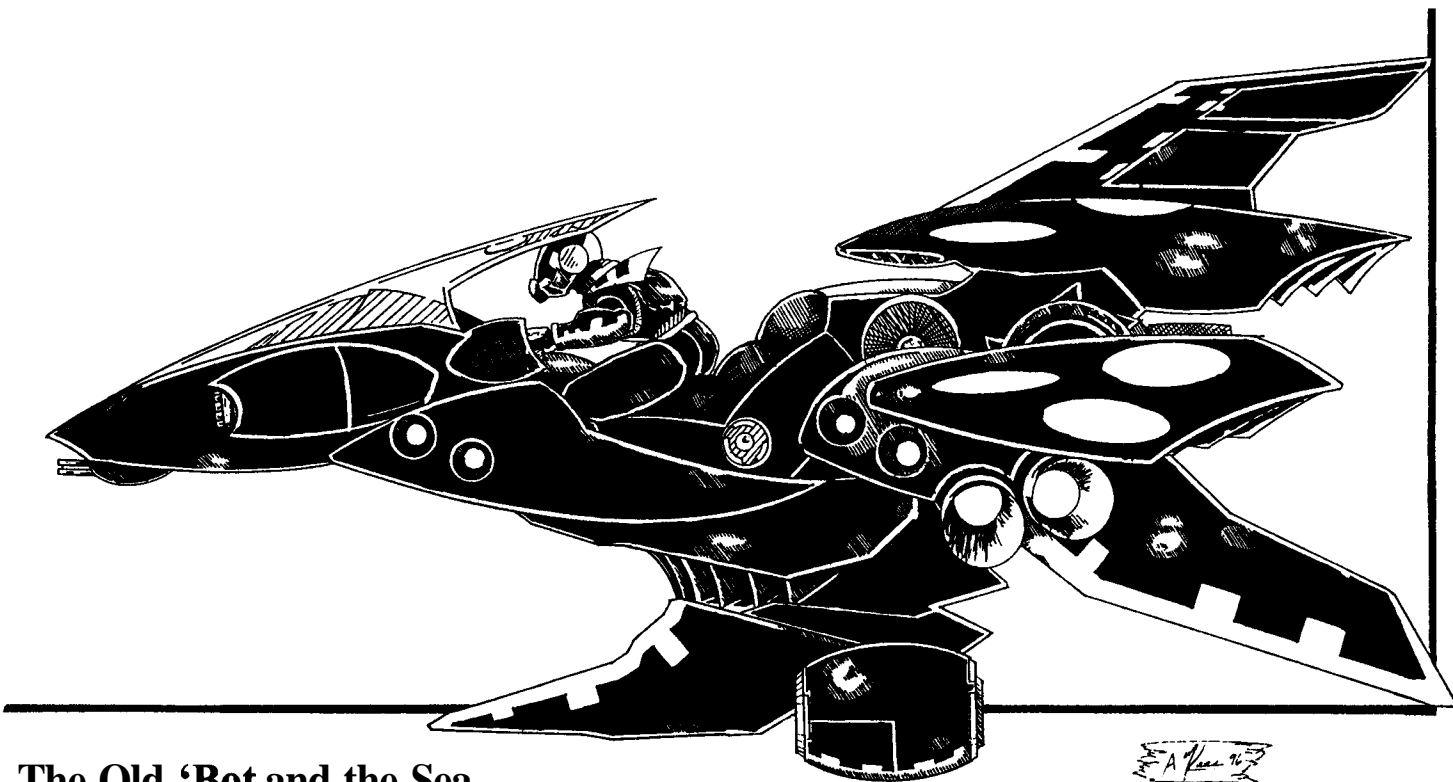
Some Hook, Line & SinkerTM Adventures

The Trouble With Skelebots

Hook: The characters are hired by a mysterious underworld contact to hunt down and destroy an enemy of his in the Pecos Empire, just outside of Lone Star. He claims that the target is a 'Borg who double-crossed him, and offers a phenomenal sum for the thing's head.

Line: As the characters track their elusive prey (who has a bad habit of walking through monster and bandit occupied lands), they notice a few interesting things. First of all, this 'Borg has a huge appetite, and has partially eaten a few monsters that got in its way. Secondly, it seems to be meeting up with reinforcements, as tracks for other cyborgs keep showing up.

Sinker: The 'Borg is actually a malfunctioning Super-Skelebot which escaped from captivity. It has reproductive organs which are operating entirely too fast, allowing the thing to clone itself at a much faster rate than normal (but don't worry; the clones are probably sterile, G.M.'s call). The underworld contact is actually a CS spy, who wanted to use the characters to get rid of the Skelebot so that there wouldn't be a link to the Coalition States. If they bring him proof that the escapee and all of its progeny are dead, he'll cheerfully pay them off, with a sizeable bonus for their silence.



The Old 'Bot and the Sea

Hook: At a town near the Great Lakes, the characters meet a simple-minded old mariner with lots of scars and a couple of recent battle wounds. He tells them that he and all of his friends fought a bunch of Sea Skelebots at a nearby island. His friends were all killed, and he was so badly beaten that he suffered some brain damage. The old man's sure that the CS plans to invade the town, but nobody will listen to him!

Line: The old man will provide a map to the island and a lightly armed fishing ship for transportation, but will not go with the characters. Along the way, the characters do see a few Coalition vessels, and may have a brief skirmish with CS helicopters or patrol boats.

Sinker: When the characters reach the island, expecting to find hordes of Dead Boys and Skelebots, they are greatly surprised when actual skeletons attack them! The island is home to a Necromancer and his hordes of the undead. If the characters can manage to alert the nearby CS forces to this threat, then the Coalition will actually end up bailing them out!

Whodunit?

Hook: The characters have been hired to help guard an archaeological expedition sponsored by the city of Lazlo. They are working with some of the top scientists and scholars in North America, unearthing a large library that was buried by seismological activity in the Great Cataclysm. There are lots of hidden caves and tunnels in the dig, providing hiding places for thieves and monsters. But thieves and monsters are not all that the expedition has to worry about.

Line: The leader of the expedition is found dead in the tunnels, his head sliced off by a Vibro-weapon. There are some clues around as to who the murderer might have been, but they will be difficult to unravel.

Sinker: The assassin was actually a Lurker Drone! One of the members of the expedition is secretly a Coalition killing machine. It has been given multiple targets, and will murder practi-

cally all of the expedition's chief minds one by one unless it is found and destroyed.

Gone Fishin'

Hook: The characters are hired by a CS agent to hunt down a massive mutant shark which has been attacking merchant ships in Southern streams and rivers near dinosaur territory. The money is good, and the CS will provide transportation, ammunition, and even some weapons. They want to keep a very low profile, however, and will not provide much overt aid.

Line: The shark is a very large and dangerous monstrosity out of prehistoric times. It's massive, with jaws big enough to rip through a submarine's hull and an appetite to match.

Sinker: The CS actually doesn't care much about merchant ships in the area. None of their ships have been attacked so far, and none of the people who have been attacked are very important to the Coalition. What matters to them is that the shark has eaten several CS Skelebots and other pieces of CS equipment. When the monster is finally killed, the people of the region will have evidence that the Coalition has been running covert naval operations in the area, which will set back certain plans by months or years.

Metalman Apocalypse

Hook: The characters come across a devastated CS convoy near Lone Star. Laser marks, ripped body armor, and dead bodies, the signs of a massive struggle, are everywhere. Strangely enough, nothing was taken from the dead bodies. Even stranger is the fact that the transports seem to have been ripped apart from the inside out.

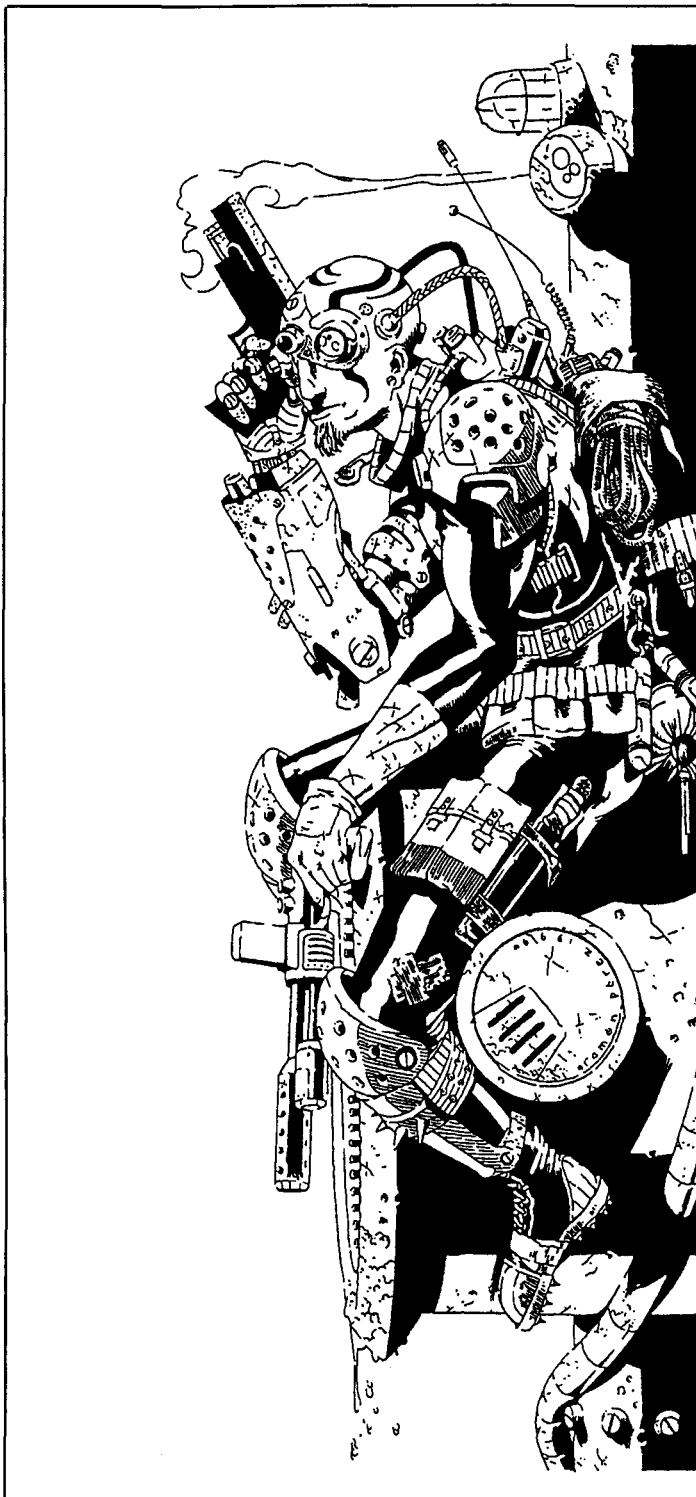
Line: Following the tracks which lead out from the convoy will take the characters to a secluded armed camp. Super-Skelebots patrol the perimeter and man anti-aircraft guns, while conventional labor bots seem to be building some sort of underground bunker.

Sinker: An insane Machine Man from the **Phase World™** dimension, stranded on Rifts Earth, learned of the **Super-Skelebots** and decided that he had discovered a new race of friends. He was so captivated by the idea of machines like himself which could replicate that he decided to liberate his brother robots from their shackles. He purchased labor drones through the Black Market, and had them start work on his base. He then created a remote-control device to re-program and activate a group of Super-Skelebots who were being transported to the testing grounds. The Machine Man plans to start an Empire of Steel, pushing out the "flesh-lings" to create a new age where robots shall reign **supreme!**

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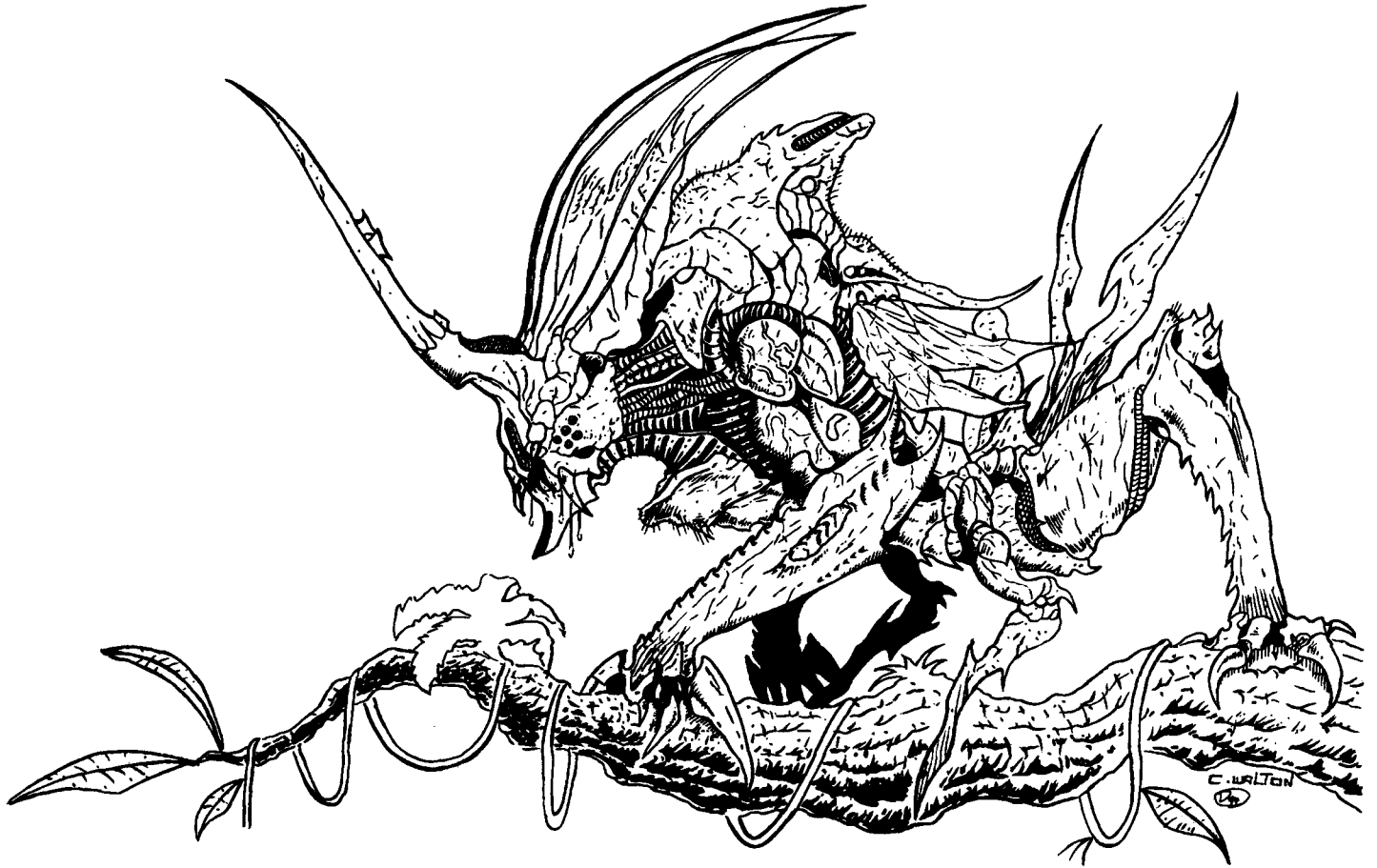
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England - A Green and Unpleasant Land

A Rifts Short Story

By Kevin F. Whitlock



Foreword

Floating beneath a canopy of autumn foliage, it seemed to be at peace with its surroundings. An alien nightmare, which was neither plant or insect, but which was strangely reminiscent of both. It blended well with the surrounding trees, conscious perhaps of the need to do so. A predator, waiting for some unsuspecting prey to fall under its evil spell.

"How long's it been **there?**," the girl enquired.

Her companion, a middle aged man, glanced across at her — watching as she lifted the glasses to her eyes once again. "Not long, a day or two perhaps. People don't wander this way very often."

"How come the villagers are worried about it then?"

"Wouldn't you be — having that thing sitting on your doorstep?"

She laid the glasses beside the rotting bowl of a tree. The grass, damp with the previous evening's dew, stuck to her clothes as she moved slightly in order to look back at him.

"Damned right I would, but that's not the point though. I mean, if they don't come here — why bother? Its not as though it was in the middle of the village. A few days longer and it'll be gone."

He was nervous she realized, watching him, as a bead of sweat ran down his forehead in the early morning light.

"Gone, gone where?" he stammered hesitantly.

Looking for a fresh supply of food, I shouldn't wonder," she replied bluntly. There's nothing else to keep it here."

He ran his fingers through the dark locks of hair matted to his forehead, Moving them from where they had fallen across his eyes.

"That's what they're afraid of. Can't you see? The village is so close by — it would be an obvious choice for such a thing.

"Obvious. Obvious to who — that thing?" she exclaimed derisively. "You're giving it credit for an intelligence it doesn't possess, my friend. It's a plant for God's sake!"

Stung by her scathing attack, he fell silent. He knew it was pointless arguing. The look in her eyes told him that. They would have to rid themselves of the creature. They shouldn't have asked her in the first place. It was their problem, not hers.

Resigned to the fact, he started to back away. No good hanging about. The sooner he got back to the village and reported to the others, the sooner they could decide how they were going to deal with it.

Pity, he thought, she wasn't bad looking. It would have been nice to have her around a while longer.

"Where are you going now?" she hissed. "I thought you'd at least stay long enough to see me dispose of it."

He paused, looking back in her direction. "Sorry," he stammered in confusion, I... I thought you weren't interested!"

"Can't afford not to be," she muttered ungraciously.

Hesitantly, he walked back towards her. "Can you get it from here, or should we try and get closer?"

He knelt, watching curiously as she shouldered the cumbersome looking L-20 Pulse Rifle. He'd never seen one before, but knew that he could trust the girl's judgement. After all, she came with excellent references.

Watching the creature over open sights, she paused thoughtfully before replying. "I reckon so, but the tree'll go with it though. Is that a problem?"

"No... Not as long as that thing's wiped out."

Jessica hesitated, then lowered the weapon. "I can get around behind it for a better shot, if you'd prefer it. Less danger to the tree that way."

"Would you mind. I... I wouldn't want to invoke the wrath of the local Druid. Not if it could be avoided."

She looked across her shoulder at him. Treating him to a somewhat contemptuous glare. "I told you, didn't I? It's no problem. Just stay there and don't make any noise. I'll be back as soon as I'm done... okay?"

"Yeah, I mean..."

"Never mind," she snapped waspishly, "stay there! No noise... I'll not be long."

Rising into a combat crouch, she disappeared into the undergrowth.

Alone with his thoughts, he eased himself down on to the floor once again. From here he had a perfect view of the creature. Looking towards it, he found himself entranced by the elegant fluttering and unfurling of its leafy tentacles. It was difficult to believe that such a strangely beautiful thing could be a killer.

Mesmerized, he crept a little closer.

Moving swiftly through the tall ferns and nettles, she looked this way and that for a better firing line. It was an annoying, and risky, business having to move. But, she rationalized, he who pays the piper, calls the shots. It wasn't the first time, since she'd been in England, that she'd had to take the flora into consideration while engaged in pest control.

Thirty feet closer, he stopped suddenly. Silence. It was eerie, there in an old, established forest. Pushing himself back into a kneeling **position**, he strained to catch sight of his red-headed companion. There was no sign of her!

Behind it now, she could start to look for the best vantage point from which to destroy the creature. Risking a glance in its direction she saw that it hadn't moved from its initial position. They had an uncanny ability to hover in one spot, as this was doing, neither losing or gaining height, until they sprang upon their hapless victims.

Another fallen tree trunk, this one covered with flowering vines, came into view.

It was ideal. Checking the safety catch, Jessica knelt, resting the weapon on the trunk. Looking across the top of it, she had both the angle to fire, without hitting the tree, and a clear view of the path that led back to the village.

Lifting the pulse rifle to her shoulder, she took careful aim at the alien. A cold shudder swept through her body, and her arms began to throb painfully. Somehow or other, it knew she was there.

Jessica was uncomfortably aware of the creature's telepathic abilities. Once, only recently, she had nearly fallen victim to such a being. This was different though — much stronger than on that occasion! It took a considerable effort to remain focused and calm.

That was when she saw him. She watched, in open mouthed, horrified fascination, as he lurched forwards onto the path before it. "What... the hell are you doing?" she whispered hoarsely. Surely, he must know what this thing was capable of — what it would do to him if he came within striking distance!

For a heartbeat in time, she hesitated. That cost him his life. It was upon him, enveloping his head in its foliage with terrifying speed. Unseen by her, as she fired, its large, false head suddenly revealed a gaping mouth. There was no sound. The yellowing, poison encrusted fangs, simply gouged away his face. It would die as he did — without a sound.

Her second shot was hurried. It struck as the creature began to change its hue — a chemical reaction that occurred as the things fed.

Moments later, gazing down at their bodies, she tried to work out why he had succumbed to its lethal charm. The remembrance of her own feelings did little to quell her disquiet.

There was no point trying to bury them, she decided. The creatures of the woodland, if nothing else, would only dig their corpses up again.

Walking home, she quickly forgot her companion. After all, there was the small matter of a bath to look forward to!

Chapter 1

A Near Miss

The multi-colored lights pulsed through the smoke filled haze, keeping time with the tempo of the music. Sitting alone behind a glass of amber colored liquid, Hargan took little notice of his surroundings. Aged twenty eight, he looked neared forty, and was well used to being left to his own devices. Indeed, he encouraged it.

A six foot four, well tanned, earth native, he had the sort of rugged good looks that appeal to many women. But being a City Rat, the kind that have few friends, and more enemies than they care to remember, few would endear themselves to him knowingly.

Today, he hoped to change that. Today he was looking for a woman, a redhead by all accounts. He didn't know for certain of course. Hadn't had a chance to make her acquaintance... yet.

He'd waited for her to arrive, despite the risk of being caught. Not that the girl could know that of course. He was as unknown to her, as was she to him. But he knew she would ar-

rive there sooner or later. Had to, there was nowhere else in town she could be stopping.

Twisting the greasy locks of hair that fell across his face, his eyes darted nervously from one person to another. Sipping his beer, he glanced at the door as a trader entered. It was market day; the place was full of such folk.

It was the reason he'd chosen to risk coming himself, rather than trusting some other fool with the job. Replacing the glass he reached for a cigarette, decided against it then continued to fiddle with his hair.



The evening was still young, the bar crowded, despite the hour. There were problems, he realized, her for one, being a redhead. She would get noticed quickly.

People tended to remember redheaded females — and the people they were with. Hargan didn't want to be remembered, not here.

Time was against him as well. He couldn't wait forever. Every minute he was there he risked discovery.

Somebody nodded in his direction. An innocent action, one not intended to draw his attention. Hargan didn't recognize the man. That worried him. Had he nodded at him, or to him?

Fidgeting nervously, he watched the man attentively. Had he waited too long, were security already on their way to pick him up? Time to go, he decided. Now! Before it was too late.

Jessica glanced in his direction as he arose from the table. He was, she guessed, in his late thirties. At something over six feet, he would tower over her diminutive five foot, four inch frame. He wore his Bushman jacket open to reveal a quite striking tattoo on his chest. He was sure of himself, she decided, almost cocky. A bounty hunter perhaps, he seemed the type!

"Do you recognize him?" Jessica enquired curiously of her companion.

"Should I?"

"He seemed to recognize you."

"How can you be sure it wasn't you he recognized?"

Jessica looked at her companion curiously, across the top of her glass. Emmitt Jackson, a middle aged and totally bald

headed man, a farmer of some importance in the community, returned her gaze steadily.

"You didn't recognize me," she countered easily, "why should this stranger?"

They sat watching, Jessica sipping her Quantiny Special, as he walked through the door. "Changing your hair color... it threw me for a minute," Jackson told her as the door swung to behind the man.

"You think it may have had the same effect on him, eh?"

"The transformation was quite spectacular, for such a minor change," he grinned. I'm glad to see that you took my advice seriously though."

"Ah," she smiled mischievously, "discretion was ever the better part of valor! Seriously though," she continued after a momentary hesitation, "if it was one of Pietre's henchmen... he'd be known to you, wouldn't he?"

"If he'd been a farm hand I might have agreed with you, but him..." Jackson lifted the glass to his lips, slurping noisily before he continued. "He didn't look as though he knew what a hard day's work was."

"So you think he was a bounty hunter then?"

Jackson shook his head as he lifted his glass once more. "I didn't say that. A thug like that can be found anywhere... why not here?"

"Better see what he wants then," Jessica replied as she placed her glass back on the table. "Otherwise, curiosity might... well, y' know what I mean, eh?"

"So," Jackson smiled as he eased himself from the chair, "I'm to be deprived of your company. All for the sake of an idle glance as well. I guess some folk are just too darned lucky for the likes of such as me!"

"Sorry," Jessica smiled apologetically, as she held out a hand towards him.

"Don't apologize," he laughed affably as he grasped her hand. "I understand."

Jessica turned, making for the door as she called back across her shoulder, "thanks for the drinks... we'll do it again someday, okay!"

"Make it soon Jessica," Jackson replied humorously, "before I get to old to enjoy your company."

They were both still laughing as the door swung to, behind her.

* * *

Frustrated — both with himself, and his foiled attempt to get to the girl — Hargan found a place from which he could watch the door of the hotel. He needed to be sure he wasn't being followed, and, to catch hold of the woman once she showed up. He'd been a fool, staying put in a place like that. It was asking for trouble!

Barely five minutes passed before a good looking blonde left the building. He ducked back out of sight as she began to scan the street. *Damn it*, he thought, as he pressed himself close to the wall, *they 'regettin' better by the day.*

There was no point hanging about. He'd have to forget about the girl for now. It was obvious they were on to him. Get clear,

and he could come back for her later. Either that, or he could try convincing **Wolfie** Carlson and his cronies to get her. "By God, she'd better be worth all the hassle," he muttered angrily to himself as he hurried away.

Although evening had fallen, the temperature had not. Stepping out from the air conditioned coolness of the bar, Jessica felt almost overcome by the heat.

Gazing around at her surroundings, she saw no sign of the man she sought. Eighteen hundred hours, yet still the street was crowded. A heaving mass of people, of different cultures, origins and skin coloration, moving this way and that about their daily business.

"This is hopeless," she muttered beneath her breath, "still... no harm in trying, I suppose."

Stepping forward into the crowd, she crossed to the far side of the street. There she paused momentarily, trying to decide which direction to take. Then, reaching a decision, she turned to the left and walked a few paces to the corner of a side street. From there she gazed back towards *The Red Crow*.

The crowd thinned, allowing her a clear view of the doorway. A good place to keep an eye on the comings and goings, she grinned to herself.

The side street seemed almost deserted in comparison. There was the odd vehicle, of course. Perfect for cover, if you needed to avoid the passing gaze of an unwanted follower. Spaces between the buildings suggested further side streets — easy to get lost in!

Without thinking, Jessica walked further along the street. It was messy, litter cluttering the highway. The people here seemed dejected, their gaze ever on the ground. There was an air of gloom about the place that she didn't care for. Nobody would "see" a stranger here, she realized quickly, it didn't pay to be too inquisitive in such places.

Half an hour, spent carefully picking her way around the block, was enough to convince Jessica that she was wasting her time. If the guy wanted her that badly, she decided, he'd find her when he was ready.

Hargan **didn't** waste any time. Once out of sight of *The Red Crow* he made swiftly for **Wolfie's** lair. A derelict garage of the **Pre-Apocalyptic** era, it had seen many owners. There, in the slums, nobody paid much attention to what sort of business was being conducted behind its closed and shuttered windows.

Five minutes, spent convincing a bunch of thugs of his sincerity, and he was talking to the man himself.

Entering the office, Hargan blinked. The harshness of a spot light, shone in the face, caught him off guard.

"So, what **d'yuh** want me for?"

"What's the hurry **Wolfie**?" Hargan smiled as he lifted an arm defensively, to block some of the light.

"Cut the crap, and get on with it." a voice growled from the darkness, "I ain't got time to waste on you!"

Hargan outlined his request. He kept it simple, anything to elaborate — and **Wolfie** would kick him out without a second thought. He was an **animal!** Most Juicers were, of course, but this guy was unbelievable.

Carlson looked at him as though he were stupid.

Perceiving the look, Hargan wasn't totally convinced that the oaf might not be right. It had been a mistake, expecting a man like this to listen!

"Why not do it **yerself**?" Carlson snapped. "Save you an awful lot of problems. Like... how are **yuh** gonna find enough creds to pay me. You still owe me a few hundred, Hargan," he sneered, "maybe you've come into money..."

"I've told you," Hargan interrupted hastily, "it's no good me going back there! As for the money, that ain't gonna be a problem."

"Have a seat Hargan, then maybe you'll explain how you reckon money ain't a problem!"

"You ain't listening **Wolfie** my man, I told you — this chick is gonna pay me... mega creds!"

Jerry "The Wolf" Carlson looked at Hargan distastefully. "Tell me again," he hissed menacingly, "in case I missed something important."

He leaned back in the ancient armchair, watching Hargan sweat as he repeated his request. When Hargan finished outlining the plan, he laughed.

He got up slowly, and strolled round the room till he came to the window. Placing his hands upon the sill, he looked back across his shoulder at the older man, and laughed again. An unpleasant sound, mocking almost. "You can't be serious Hargan, not even you are that stupid!"

"Glad you find it so amusing," Hargan replied, struggling to keep his voice even as Carlson turned to face him.

"Amusing, it's so damned laughable I'm not even gonna bother to kill you," his tormentor screamed in derision, "I'll let the **Splugorth's** security teams deal with you instead. I'm sure you'll enjoy entertaining them... for a short time at least!"

Hargan came out of his seat with the speed and agility of a wildcat. Crossing the room in the blink of an eye, he grabbed for Carlson's neck. His hands, wrapped firmly around the Juicer's throat, gripped firmly as he pushed his victim up against the grimy, white washed walls.

"Listen moron," he spat venomously, "I've taken enough from you today to last a lifetime. You'll do it, **'cause** I say you'll do it. More than that — you'll enjoy doing it. Understand!"

Wolfie Carlson didn't **frighten** easily. Wasn't frightened now, in fact. The speed of Hargan's attack, and the sheer venom with which he addressed him, had taken him by surprise. Nothing more.

A heartbeat later, he was struggling to pry Hargan's hands from his throat — and, when he found that wasn't working quickly enough, he struck him viciously between the legs with his knee.

Hargan staggered backwards. His hands clutched to his groin, he gasped for breath as Carlson advanced menacingly with a wicked looking blade in one of his huge, bony hands.

"I'm gonna rip your arms off one at a time Hargan," he hissed between clenched teeth. "Then, I'm gonna stick my fist down your throat and rip your heart out!"

Unarmed, Hargan searched desperately for a weapon. If **Wolfie** got close to him with that knife of his... well! The mere thought of it drew beads of sweat.

Without knowing quite how it happened, **Hargan** suddenly found the chair he'd been sat on in his hands. **Carlson**, lumbering forward, lunged as he swung it off the floor.

The knife bit into the solid wooden seat, imbedding itself almost up to the hilt.

Then, as **Hargan** staggered backwards with the force of the blow, **Carlson** found himself lifted forwards. His crushing head-butt against the wall brought a tiny shower of dust down over the duo, as **Carlson** crashed unconscious to the floor.

Hargan wriggled amidst the oil and urine soaked paper which littered the floor. Trying desperately to get from under **Wolfie's** inert body, he suddenly felt the need to vomit. Shaking his head, he gasped for air as he struggled to stave off the sensation. He had to be on his feet, before **Carlson** regained consciousness. That way, he had a sporting chance of staying alive.

Carlson's weight made getting up difficult. The nauseating stench of the man — a combination of the drugs he took, the place they were in and stale sweat — smothered **Hargan** as it wafted unpleasantly beneath his nose.

* * *

The room was almost bare, devoid of any but the most essential features. The large double bed was comfortable, and a small cupboard was large enough to contain such belongings as **Jessica** possessed. Fortunately, it wasn't too expensive to maintain.

Sitting on the side of the bed, **Jessica** eased out of her shoes and then flopped gratefully back into the soft embrace of the blanket covered mattress. The day had had its moments. Certainly, it had been fun, relaxing with **Jackson**.

There was a problem, of course. The elders of the village hadn't been too impressed when she had returned to tell them that her guide had gotten himself killed.

Admittedly she'd been paid, and not just her normal fee, but a decent bonus as well, which had come as quite a surprise. Of course, that was thanks to the considerable influence of **Emmitt Jackson**. If it had been left to the chairman, **Pietre Colbiere**, she might never have been paid at all.

Normally, the villagers would have invited such a benefactor to stay a while. This time however, she had been ushered out of the village as soon as she'd been paid off.

Emmitt had been uncharacteristically withdrawn as he shook her hand at the fringes of the stockade. So much so in fact, that she had doubted that he would arrive at their dinner engagement.

His earlier, whispered, warning — that she should adapt a new image — had done little to reassure her either. Only later, when, much to her relief, **Emmitt** had arrived at *The Red Crow*, did she discover the reason for his apparent sullenness. The guide, he informed **Jessica** during dinner, was a favored hand and good **friend** of **Colbiere's**.

His death while in her company had been the source of some uncharitable whisperings amongst the elders of the village. In the council **chambers**, once the news of his death had been heard, rumors had begun. Some suggested **Jessica** had used him as bait.

Other, less credible ideas had also been offered. None of which gave **Jessica** credit for a job well done, let alone admitted the possibility that she might be telling the truth.

Pietre Colbiere had no real opinion, one way or the other. The fact was — or seemed, to him at least — that she had gotten his friend killed through her own negligence.

Although he would never have threatened her in public, it was **Emmitt's** sincere belief that **Pietre** would contrive to have her murdered as a means of getting retribution.

Being the good man that he was, **Emmitt** couldn't allow that to happen. Unfortunately, neither could he be seen to interfere. Not without damaging his own standing.

Jessica tried reasoning with him of course. It wasn't that he didn't understand her point of view... he did, only too well. For **Emmitt** though, the fact that his livelihood was dependent upon the people of the village, their goodwill and that of the **Colbieres**, was too much to risk on behalf of a transient.

Here in the town, some eight miles away from the village, she felt safe from the threats of a distant family. **Emmitt**, however, was of a different opinion.

"You need to get right out of the area — give things a chance to die down," he'd told her earnestly.

She could hear him now, it was as if . . .

* * *

Hargan had wrestled the blade out of **Wolfie's** hand and then straddled his back. No good giving the bastard a chance to get to his feet. With his own blade at his throat, **Wolfie Carlson** was going to listen! He wasn't a fool.

A muffled groan from somewhere between **Hargan's** legs told him of **Carlson's** return to consciousness. Gripping the blade firmly, he wrapped his arm round **Wolfie's** throat and placed the edge of the blade against the soft flesh of his neck.

Carlson froze. Still dazed from blow to the head, the cool touch of the blade against his exposed skin warned him that he still had a problem. **Hargan**, enjoying the moment, placed his lips close to **Wolfie's** ear.

"Glad to see we understand each other, **Wolfie** my man! Now... as I was saying. I want that girl... want her brought to me. Understood!"

Carlson gurgled incoherently, his face almost buried in **Hargan's** coat. Slowly, **Hargan** relaxed his grip. When **Carlson** made no sudden move to free himself, he placed a hand squarely between the hapless **Juicer's** shoulder blades, as a balance with which to push himself erect.

"You'll die for this **Hargan**," **Carlson** swore vehemently, "I promise you!"

"Never doubted it for a minute my friend," **Hargan** chuckled wickedly. "But, in the meantime... don't forget my parcel! I'll expect it by mid day, alright?"

By the time **Carlson** was on his feet, **Hargan** had disappeared.

* * *

The room was still dark when Jessica opened her eyes. The night sky was clear beyond the window, the reflected neon light of the nearest Ley Line an unsought comfort.

Something, some sixth sense, had awakened her. Lying still, she tried to figure out what it was. There was no sound, nothing to suggest somebody was in the room with her.

Convinced she was alone, she shifted to the edge of the bed. Relaxing, she stretched her body. Unconsciously, she brushed away a ringlet of hair that fell across her face. The soft click of a distant latch went almost unnoticed. Hearing the sound of foot-steps, and a floorboard creaking underfoot, she began once again to feel uneasy.

Jessica pushed herself into a sitting position. Her legs draped over the side of the mattress, she felt about with her feet for the shoes she had kicked off earlier. Using the backs of her slender hands, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes as her wandering feet found the first.

Quickly, she pulled first one, then the other onto her feet. Looking around, only the window seemed to offer her any chance of escape should the need arise. An unseen hand tested the door catch, and found it locked.

The window opened quietly. Grasping one side of the frame as a cool wind bit at her exposed face, she pulled herself up and out onto the sill.

The street seemed to be empty. Balancing herself, she reached gingerly for the drainage pipe that ran from the roof to the ground some twenty feet below.

The bedroom door rattled in its frame, as somebody tested the lock's powers of resistance. Jessica was barely five feet from the ground when she heard it shatter under the weight of a hefty blow.

From somewhere in the room above, she heard a muttered oath as her feet touched solid ground. The shadows had already enveloped her slender form when a shaven head appeared at the window.

It was cold, and had rained heavily while she slept. Ducking behind a parked vehicle, she risked a glance in the direction of *The Red Crow*. Her belongings were there. She wasn't going to lose all that — not to a bunch of amateur hit men, anyway.

They were gonna be busy searching for her, she decided. There weren't enough of 'em to leave anyone in the room. That being so, she'd go back as soon as they left. Once she had a weapon, she would be safe. That was, of course, providing the intruders hadn't the presence of mind to search her room before they left.

Two shadowy forms crossed the road, moving away from *The Red Crow*. If they had weapons, they were well concealed. Nonetheless, there was no point taking risks.

They were, Jessica acknowledged, too bloody confident for burglars. Hugging the darkness, they sped down the opposite side of the street towards her.

Jessica dropped to the ground behind the car. There, in a pool of oily water, she felt for her Wilkes pistol. With a startled gasp, as her hand felt cloth — rather than leather — she remembered that she was still in evening wear. Rolling under the vehicle, she swore vehemently.

They paused as they drew level with the vehicle, the sound of their labored breathing reaching her straining ears. Her would-be captors, it appeared, were out of shape.

Using her innate abilities, she carefully studied their aura as they stood, undecided as to whether to check the car or not. A vehicle, turning into the street, forced them to reconsider. "Security," she heard one snap at his companion. "Move, before they see us and get curious."

Crawling along the street on its air cushion, it seemed to take ages before it drew along side. The curb dug into her shoulders as she cringed away from its passengers' prying eyes. Better, for the moment at least, to keep them ignorant of her presence.

Breathing easily, Jessica clambered from beneath the car once the security vehicle was out of sight. Her friends, it seemed, had disappeared as well. She was soaked she realized, as the soft cotton material of her skirt clung to her legs. Once back at her lodgings though, it wouldn't matter. She wasn't short of clothes.

It wasn't far.

Barely a minute elapsed before she was back beneath the window. Looking up at her room, she listened — hoping to hear anyone who might still be lurking there. Nothing. It felt okay.

Despite scraping her knuckles on the brickwork, she took hold of the waste pipe once again. She climbed quickly with cat-like ease. The brickwork was damp, the pipe slippery, cool to the touch.

Entering the room cautiously, she paused beside the bed to dry her hands on the blanket. It took only a second or two to retrieve her baggage.

The intruders had almost kicked the room door off its hinges, she noticed. Curiously, there was nobody in the **hallway**, nor, when she reached them, was there anyone on the stairs.

Briefly, she wondered if her would-be assailants had had inside help. There wasn't time to waste, trying to find out now. Quickly, she crossed through the empty bar.

The door, she noticed, was covered in blood. Perhaps, after all, she had been uncharitable in thinking as she had. There was no sign of a body, nothing to suggest who had gotten in the way of the intruders.

Unfastened, the door opened easily. A quick glance told her the street was deserted. Shouldering her holdall, she pulled the door closed behind her, and walked away into the darkness.

Chapter 2

A Strange Way to Meet

Lying, looking up at the ceiling of his small apartment, Hargan wondered if he hadn't bitten off more than he could chew. His informant, a weasel-like D-Bee, had given him only the scarcest information to go on.

It wasn't by any means certain, that this Colbiere guy was after the girl. Thing was, though, would she know that? Personally, Hargan doubted whether she'd have waited long enough to find out. He wouldn't have. Not that *that* was anything to go by — he was well used to finding himself in such scrapes, and getting out of them.

If he could only get to her first... and sew the seeds of doubt in her mind. Surely, this redhead would be grateful. Fall over herself to pay her benefactor for the information — if not for rescuing her from Colbiere's murderous **grasp!**

Pity he'd had to introduce **Wolfie** into the equation though. You could never be certain how things would go, not when that bastard stuck his nose into things.

Getting off the sofa, Hargan walked over to his private supply of hooch. He needed a drink. Needed something to soothe away the memory of his most recent encounter with Carlson.

There was something about the guy. He wasn't as fast as Hargan last remembered him... some two years earlier. But no, it wasn't that. There was something else... something he couldn't put his fingers on yet. It would come to him though.



He poured a large measure into a dirty liter glass before sitting back on the sofa. Taking a swallow of the fiery liquid, he let it course through his body before placing the glass on the arm of his seat.

Rolling a cigarette, he tried to figure out just how **Wolfie** had appeared different. The effects of the alcohol he had been drinking all evening numbed his already confused senses.

"To hell with it," he swore aloud, "you're there... I'm here. That's all that matters, my man! You don't know where I am."

His eyes closed momentarily. *Can't sleep*, a voice whispered in his mind, *to much to do*.

He struggled vainly to keep his eyes open. It was too much effort. Sleep overtook him, even as he struggled to fight it off.

Unnoticed, the cigarette fell from his fingers. It rolled, still burning, down between the cushion and the arm of the chair to where forgotten scraps of paper lay in wait to receive its fiery warmth.

* * *

Wolfie Carlson, his face creased by unearned wrinkles — the legacy of a misspent youth — looked vacantly at the two men stood before him. "What d'yuh mean, wasn't there? 'Course she was there. You think I didn't check, before I sent you?"

"Jerry," the smaller of the two butted in, "'course you checked." We know that," he simpered, trying to wheedle Carlson around to their way of thinking. "What we're sayin' is that she'd disappeared by the time we'd got there!"

"Bollocks, **Janic**," Carlson snapped angrily, "what you mean is, you bottled out!"

The man flinched. He knew that **Wolfie** was capable of murder for far less than what was being suggested here.

"That's not fair, **Wolfie**," the second interrupted, "we did as you..."

"Shut the hell up," Carlson interrupted with a snarl, "I didn't ask for your opinion!"

The two men looked at each other pensively, each waiting for the other to do or say something while Carlson glared at them across the top of his desk. For a moment, silence fell upon the room.

"Well! What are you standing there for?" Carlson snapped a moment or two later. Get out and find her, **Janic**... and don't come back without her!"

He paused to get his breath back. The second man continued to stand there, shifting his weight nervously from one foot to another, unsure of what was expected of him.

"Piss off and fetch that pox-ridden **Body Fixer**. I can feel another spasm coming on.

"Oh! By the way, when **Janic** gets back... waste him. Loser, **G'Narsh**. We don't need losers!"

"Sure, what about the girl... do I waste her as well?"

"Not yet! I want to know what Hargan was after. Find that out, and we'll know whether he was on to an earner," Carlson replied. "Now... Get out!"

Leaning back in his armchair, Carlson picked up a cigarette. A muscle in one of his dark-skinned cheeks twitched violently. It wouldn't be long now, he realized, before the withdrawal symptoms tore at his drug-shattered body.

He hated and feared what happened during these attacks. Had no control over them. He'd enjoyed his two years as a **Juicer**, but he wasn't a fool. He knew there was a good chance for survival, providing he got out in time.

He'd been through the detox program some six months earlier. They'd warned him it would take some time... to cure all the side effects. At the moment, though, he wasn't bothered about that. He had to survive this one first.

He felt his tongue gingerly, and swore vehemently when he realized it had already started to swell. His hands started to shake then, and yet another twitch — this one just below the left eye — rippled across his cheek. If he was lucky, the **Body Fixer** would arrive to administer a sedative before it got a real grip on him.

His eyes began to roll backwards into his head. He screamed then...

Outside, G'Narsh lit a cigarette. He inhaled the smoke **slowly...lovingly** almost. There was no hurry. *Serves the bastard right*, he thought. Another scream rent the air. He'd seen all the telltale signs before, of course. He knew that the longer he waited, the more **Wolfie** Carlson would suffer. He wanted him to suffer. After all... who the hell did he think he was, eh?

He leaned on the stairway handrail. Put the cigarette in his mouth, and took another, luxuriously long, draw on it. The good thing about it, he told himself mentally, was that the bastard wouldn't remember afterwards. Not, at least, how long he'd had to wait.

A can rattled somewhere close by. He stood back from the handrail slowly, and peered into the darkness in the direction which he thought the sound had come from.

That was when Janic shot him.

He watched G'Narsh crumple over the rail. Watched as his lifeless hands released the dying cigarette butt. There was no hurry, nobody would be coming this way for a while yet.

He'd overheard **Wolfie's** instructions regarding his execution, of course. It hadn't bothered him. The crazy bastard would have forgotten by the morning. G'Narsh, on the other hand, would not. Janic had prepared a plausible story to account for his disappearance, while he waited for the fool to appear. It paid to be **prepared!**

Slowly he crossed the compound. It was raining again, not heavily, yet it was enough to remind him that his clothes were already sodden. Shouldering the weapon, he used a sleeve to wipe away the moisture from his brow.

Climbing the steps towards G'Narsh's inert **body**, he paused to listen to the whimpering sounds that came from the office. Carlson was in a bad way. Maybe he'd get the quack when he was finished arranging things. Maybe, maybe not. He hadn't decided yet.

Standing over the body of his former comrade, he grinned wickedly. Lashing out, he kicked the body ruthlessly. It gave him a perverse sense of pleasure to be able to do so — without fear of repercussions. G'Narsh would've done the same, had their positions been reversed.

Lifting the body, he struggled to manhandle it through the office door. Briefly, before he pushed the body forward on top of the Juicer, he saw the hulking brute scrabbling about in the filth. His head had lifted as Janic entered the room, staring blindly in the rat's direction. The only sound he'd made, a curious mix of gurgling and grunting cries of pain, left Janic unmoved.

He waited in the doorway until Wolfie fell silent.

* * *

Maloy was unconscious when Janic stumbled into his make-shift surgery. Removing the bottle of surgical spirits from the outstretched hand of the doctor, he examined the contents of the bottle carefully before emptying it over the quack's sleeping form.

Spattering noisily, Maloy struggled unsuccessfully to see who was in the room with him. Standing behind the chair in which the quack had fallen asleep, Janic reached forwards and viciously pulled the drunkard's head backwards by the hair.

Maloy screamed as Janic's arm slowly folded about his neck. "Leave the spirits alone, old man," the rat hissed venomously. "You'll never be able to save your cred chip from dyin' on you otherwise!"

* * *

Walking the streets, Jessica sought a resting place. Briefly, she considered returning to *The Red Crow* — the room was hers after all. It was only the possibility of Colbiere's henchmen returning that stopped her.

It was nearly 600 hrs. Daylight would return within the hour, she'd be safer then. Especially if she chose somewhere there would be a lot of people.

At first, lost in thought, she didn't notice the smoke spilling out across the road. A screaming woman gave Jessica her first **hint** of trouble.

Looking up, Jessica saw her. A terrified mutant — she stood screaming at the door of one of the apartment blocks. "Fire, help me for Nodin's sake, me kids' I fry 'emselves browner than a Kelpie's butt!"

For a second, Jessica was tempted to burst into laughter at the woman's antics. Instead, she threw down her holdall and commanded her to watch her bags.

"Where are they **exactly?**," Jessica cried out above the roar of the fire.

"In the end room — first floor, next to Hargan's place!"

It meant nothing to Jessica. There wasn't time to question the woman further though. Not if she hoped to get the kids out of danger.

At the top of the stairs, Jessica paused. Peering through the smoke, she strained to see where the doors were. A spell was needed if she was to avoid being seriously burnt. It didn't seem to matter how much she tried to hide the power that was hers to wield. There was always something waiting to force her to use it.

She'd been forced to flee her native America because of people's fear of magic. A lifetime spent trying to escape Prosek's mutant Dog Packs had taught her not to be careless with its use. Looking around, she made sure she was alone, before chanting the words of the spell beneath her breath.

Resistance to fire would allow her to move about, with little regard for the heat the fire was generating. The danger was still a real one though. It wouldn't protect her from the licking caress of the flames themselves, and she needed to hurry, before the effects of the spell wore off.

Searching the room the woman had indicated, Jessica quickly discovered it to be empty. Either the kids had fled, or they were elsewhere in the building. Turning quickly, she made for the door.

She would have to check the other rooms. It was the only way to be certain. As she left, a man, his clothes in flames, staggered away from the next door along the corridor.

Thinking quickly, she grasped him as he tried to run past. Flinging him, struggling desperately to the floor, she promptly tried to smother the flames with her body. Hargan passed out once again, without recognizing his savior.

It was easier, she realized, to breathe laid on the ground. Taking hold of his collar, she tried dragging him to the head of the stairwell. Her hands were blistering, and throbbed painfully. He was heavy, the dead weight of his unconscious body slowing her down.

Have to rest a second, she told herself mentally. Looking back along the corridor, Jessica watched in horrified fascination as flames consumed the door through which Hargan had staggered. A fit of coughing wracked her body. Her smoke-filled lungs protesting violently as she gulped in the cooler air here on the floor.

Struggling to her knees, she grasped Hargan beneath the arms. Then, summoning what remained of her energy, she half lifted, half dragged him down the steps toward the front door.

Willing hands grabbed him from her, when at last she emerged into the fresh air. He was badly burnt, and Jessica too had blisters upon her hands and face.

The orange and purple spotted mutant who had first captured her attention, ran across to Jessica's side as she collapsed beside the fire tender.

"Mercy me gal," she cried, upon seeing Jessica's injuries. "Hargan was certain lucky you came along when you did. Sorry missus, for **gettin'** you into that. I swear, I didn't know them boys of mine had snuck out. I sure am gonna paste their butts when I get hold of **'em** though. You mark my words on that!"

She paused to draw breath, as Jessica held up a hand in protestation. When nothing came from her lips though, the mutant bent low and placed a friendly arm about her shoulders.

"You alright honey Chile? See... you stay there and rest a moment," she crooned in a low concerned voice. "I'll just pop next door an get somethin' cool fer you to set your lips to, okay?"

Her last reserves of energy drained away as she sat, her back propped against the smoke damaged wall of the building. When the mutant returned a moment later with a glass of water, it was to find Jessica all but asleep.

Chapter 3

Missed Opportunities

Wolfie groaned as consciousness returned. His whole being felt as though it had been severely kicked and punched. He tried to open his eyes. The light that filtered through the narrowed slits of his half closed eyelids, hurt enough to make him close them again instantly.

He groaned again, trying desperately to "rise above" the various aches and pains that swept through his body. In that, he failed miserably.

A reassuring hand fell on his shoulder. "Lay still," a feminine voice commanded him, "it'll pass soon enough."

He tried opening his eyes again, but the pain was excruciating. "Who's that?" he grunted savagely. "I don't recognize your voice."

"My name is **Olga**, not that that need concern you. And, before you ask, no... we've never met before. As for your next logical question, you're in a Chop Shop. But that needn't concern



you too much either," the voice informed him caustically. "You were brought here by friends. Now, is that all? I do have one or two other patients to look after this morning."

Wolfie froze at the mention of the infamous "Chop Shop." Everybody knew their reputation. "What am I doing here?" he screamed in abject terror. "What the hell have you done to me?"

"Done? Mr **Carlson**," the voice mocked him. "What on earth do you think we've done? The operation was only a minor one. Your friend, Janic... said that the **'improvements**,' were of your own personal design. Quite impressive really!"

Wolfie gurgled incoherently, and began to froth at the mouth.

"Do calm down Mr. Carlson," the voice rebuked him sternly. "It was nothing... really! I'm going to have one myself, now that I've seen yours."

Her insanely maniacal laughter faded slowly, as she moved down the ward.

Two Body Fixers watched nervously as she left the room. "She's getting worse Charlie," one of them told the other. "You'd better go and reassure the poor bastard. Otherwise he'll have a heart attack. For Christ's sake... did you see him, he was actually foaming at the **mouth!**"

Laughing together, they approached his bed.

In the bed next to Carlson, Hargan too was trembling uncontrollably. He didn't know how he'd gotten there. Wasn't really sure he wanted to. His arms and head, swathed in bandages, itched with a prickly heat. It was all too easy to imagine what these bastards might have done to him.

Hargan watched in fear as the two white-coated figures approached Wolfie's bed. Watched, as they quietly drew the curtains and went inside.

He never heard what they said to his neighbor. They spoke professionally, in very quiet tones.

* * *

Jessica slept until quite late. Waking in an unfamiliar room, she tried to recall what had happened before she had fallen asleep.

An elderly woman entered the room quietly. "Ah," she gasped, as Jessica's green eyes opened curiously. "I see you've awakened at last my girl. You must have been exhausted!"

"Where am I? What..."

"Ssssh, now there's a good lass. I'll give you all the answers to your questions in a minute," the woman replied soothingly.

Jessica looked around the room. From the bed, she watched the elderly woman fussing over a tray on which sat a steaming mug of pleasant smelling liquid. "Here you are dear," the woman whispered as she passed her the mug, "drink this... you'll feel much better after that."

Jessica propped herself up on the pillow before taking the mug from the mysterious woman. Sipping the liquid, Jessica watched entranced — as a seat floated away from the wall where it had been stood, to land close to the bed.

The elderly woman introduced herself as Mable Thackery, before sitting down upon the chair. "My neighbor, the one whose children you tried to save from the fire, asked if I could give you a bed. She would have done it herself of course, had the fire not wrecked her place.

"What happened to the man — the one I did manage to get out?"

"Ah, you remember that. That's good. Did you know him?... Oh, sorry... I don't recall your name," Mable apologized.

"Jessica... Jessica A'Moriel."

"Thank you... Jessica. A pretty name — it suits you, if I might say so."

Jessica blushed. A silence fell over them for a moment or two, while Mable fidgeted with her dress. "Your accent," she continued a second or two later, "you're not from here **abouts?**"

"American, I'm from the Coalition territories," Jessica interjected. "I've only been in this country for a couple of seasons."

They spoke together for some time, before Mrs Thackery arose. "You should rest some **more**, my dear," she told Jessica seriously. "You can stay tonight if you wish. It won't cost you anything; you might have other plans though."

Jessica smiled. "Thanks Mrs Thackery, that would be great. I've certainly no where else to go."

"That's settled then," her companion announced. But please... call me Mable. Mrs Thackery is far too formal, we're friends now after all, aren't we?"

Jessica nodded happily.

"Good, that's that then. How do you... prefer to be addressed I mean. Jessica is such a pretty name, it seems a pity to shorten it!"

"Jessica is just fine **Mable**, that's what everybody calls me anyway."

When her companion left the room, Jessica smiled to herself. Dotty as a fruit cake. It must, she told herself, be a trait of psychics. Still, if it got her a free bed, who was she to complain? It struck her then, that she still hadn't learned what had become of the man she had rescued.

* * *

The medics had left some time before. The pain killers they'd administered before they'd left had kicked in, allowing Hargan to turn slightly and examine Wolfie's recumbent form. He looked, although slightly paler, his usual ugly self, he thought.

Carlson blinked, as he watched. "You alright, **Wolfie** my man?" Hargan enquired.

Carlson turned his head at the sound of Hargan's voice. "What in hell... tell me I'm dead Hargan. Tell me this is a nightmare, and that I'll wake up after you've left!"

"Oh, c'mon. It ain't all that bad... surely."

"You tellin' me," Carlson snapped, "or **askin'** me? One way or another, the answer is '**yeah!**'"

Hargan stifled a laugh. "What are you **doin'** here anyway, Wolfie? Don't tell me you're in for **cyberware** attachments!"

Carlson tried to get out of bed. His legs slipped from underneath him as he lunged for Hargan's prone form. "Bastard," he snarled, "it was probably you who signed me in here."

"No such luck my man," Hargan replied cheerfully. "I'd have killed you before you'd arrived! So why is it then, how come you're here? Did you think I'd signed myself in — just to be near you? C'mon, get real, Wolfie my man."

There was no reply for a few minutes. Carlson, his head spinning, was too busy trying to get back on the bed. "You're a sadist Hargan, you'd do it to torture me," he replied once he'd got comfortable.

Hargan looked at him resignedly, "If you say so. But that still doesn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"What are you doing? Here, I mean."

"None of your business, Hargan. Why are you?"

"The bloody flat caught fire while I was asleep. I got some burns before some bird came in and dragged me out."

"Just my luck," Carlson snapped contemptuously. "Some woman saves your miserable hide, while I sit there praying that somethin' like that would rid the world of your fat carcass!"

"Good to know you care. Did you get my package, by the way?"

"Does it look like it?"

"Well," Hargan replied casually, "you ain't gonna find her laid there. Sooner **yuh** get on with it my man, the sooner you and I get to enjoy some of her creds."

"What makes you so certain, Hargan? There was nothin' in what you told me earlier — not enough to convince me anyway!"

"I told you, this guy... Colbiere I think his name is. He's after bumpin' this chick off. It was on account of her being responsi-

ble, in some way, for getting one of his mates killed. That's what I heard anyway. She got a nice pay packet from the job she was doing when this guy gets himself killed.

"All we have to do is find her, and convince her that she's in danger. Imagine how grateful the broad is gonna be... when we offer to sort the problem out for her!"

"Let me get this right," Carlson sneered. "You reckon that that's gonna be worth 10,000 creds? You're messed up in the head, Hargan! If she's as good as you say she's made out to be, why the hell would she need you, eh? Tell me that!"

* * *

The room was still dark when Jessica awoke. Refreshed, she stepped light-heartedly from the bed and sought a washroom, before getting dressed. The sounds of movement from the floor below warned her that her hostess was already up and about. The smell of **cooking**, that she was hungry.

"Good morning dear," Mable greeted her, as she walked into the tiny living room. "You slept well, I trust?"

Jessica smiled as Mable thrust a steaming mug in her direction. "Like a log, thanks."

"I'm glad dear, now — have a seat while I prepare something to eat. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day **y'know.**"

Raising the mug to her lips, Jessica watched as Mable bent over the cooker. A grey-haired and wrinkled woman of indeterminate years, she was quite spritely. "Something smells good," Jessica remarked casually. "I must admit to being a might hungry!"

"Bacon, eggs and fresh mushrooms, 't ain't much, but it'll set a busy woman like you up. Now, would you like some home made bread to go with it?"

"Great," Jessica replied, as her hostess entered with a steaming plate of food. "I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, Mable, perhaps I could pay you."

Mable motioned her to take a seat at the table. "Enough dear, be on with your food before it gets cold," the old woman replied. "It ain't often we get someone as caring as you were yesterday. Me and the neighbors — we're just glad we can show our appreciation!"

They ate together in silence. Then, as Mable cleared away the dishes, she asked Jessica what her plans were.

"Today? Nothing particular. I've got to find work, of course, but it can wait if you have something you need doing."

"Oh! No, you misunderstood me dear," Mable chuckled. "What I meant was, in the longer term. Are you staying — around here I mean?"

"As long as I can find work. The sort of things I **do**, you're never one place very long."

Mable looked at her curiously. "Sounds exciting dear, traveling all over. Wish I could. Probably would have gone with you, if I were a few years younger."

They laughed together as Jessica stood up and started gathering her things.

"Thanks again for your hospitality, I'd better be on my way now though. One of the problems with this style of living,

Mable," she sighed. "You never know what sort of problems will pop up — or the danger you might drop upon those you care about."

"If you say so, dear," the old lady smiled sadly, "I hope we'll meet again one day. It's been lovely **knowin'** you." A tear crept down her cheek as she fell silent.

Jessica crossed the room to stand before her. Reaching for the old woman, she hugged her tenderly for a moment, then stepped away. It was no good delaying. Such moments were always hard. The best thing to do was to go with a smile. Jessica managed that — at least till she was out of sight.

* * *

Extract from *The Diaries of an English Gentleman & Scholar.* — 102 P.A.

"North Hampton, (The Pre Rifts town of Northampton) nestles in a quiet valley. A shadow of the town that formerly stood there, it has survived the holocaust only because of its geographical location. Nearly three hundred thousand people died there during the opening of the Rifts and the appearance of the first Ley Lines.

"Law and order broke down swiftly following the aftermath. For the first quarter of the century thereafter, the town and surrounding countryside was ravaged by warring bands of looters and vagabonds. It was a desperate time. With little food, and no medical facilities, the survivors lived by their wits. Even what might once have been considered minor wounds, were often fatal.

"Plague rats followed in the wake of the town's destruction, bringing pestilence with them. Many of those the appearing Rifts failed to kill, these foul creatures wiped out in the successive years.

"In 50 P.A. a young man, calling himself Sir **Geoffry** of **Brixworth**, appeared in the town. A knight, in the service of **Arr'thuu**, he gathered the largest and strongest of the bands together. These, he then quickly set to work — rebuilding and fortifying the town.

"When in 69 P.A. Sir Geoffry was killed, on Naesby fields, the town center was almost completely restored, although the present walls had still to be fully built. His successor was poisoned a year after his appointment. Three others followed in quick succession.

"Once it was clear that the ordinary folk wouldn't accept a single leader, a council of elders was elected to run the town. Like many other midlands towns, it seems to appreciate its autonomy — and works hard to strengthen its position, both in commerce and in land holding.

"Once the heart of the British Leather industry, it is now recognized as a textile manufacturer. The population comprises nearly 80% Earth Native beings. The remaining 20% being a roughly equal division, between mutants and D-Bees.

"A hospital, one of only a few in England, was erected on the site of the town's former General Hospital.

"The population is forced to contribute to its maintenance, and can, in return, expect subsidized treatment. Outsiders, too, can get treatment there. The cost is, however, prohibitive."

It should be noted that the above text — taken verbatim, from the pages of the diaries of Edmund, an English gentleman and a scholar — cannot in any way be regarded as a true and accurate account of events.

Indeed, over the last year or two it has been revealed that, at the time of writing, Edmund was far from conversant with the archaeological evidence connected with the town. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that he had ever been to England either. Being in fact a noted alcoholic, and a regular of The Dog & Duck Inn - in the town of Dublin. A place, long celebrated as the home of the Tall Story Tellers Guild.

* * *

Jessica soon found herself close to the hospital. Acting on impulse, she decided to visit the stranger she had rescued the previous day.

"Can I help you," a security guard enquired, as she stepped into the reception hall.

"I'm looking for somebody. He was brought here yesterday I believe."

"Does your friend have a name? It'll be easier to locate them if I know who I'm looking for."

Jessica looked at him for a second or two, trying to remember what **Mable** had called the man. "Sorry... I... Hargan — his name, that's it, it was Hargan."

"Is that a first name... or a surname?" The guard watched her closely, scrutinizing every movement of her face.

Alarmed by this, Jessica stepped back a pace before replying. "I... I'm sorry, I don't know."

"One moment, I'll check the admissions list, see if I can find anybody of that name. Is your friend male, or female. Earth Native, Mutant or **D-Bee**?"

"Male... Earth Native I think."

"Thank you. That makes the job much easier. If you'll take a seat, I'll see what I can find out. If you know what was wrong with him, it'll help speed things up of course."

"He was **burned**... quite badly, or so I understand."

The guard began scrutinizing her again. "Are you alright? Perhaps I might get you a trauma councillor. Someone trained to help friends and relatives cope with problems that arise in such situations as you now find yourself."

Jessica, her temper rising as the guard continued, began to turn away in agitation. Then, thinking better of it, she turned her smouldering gaze back in his direction. "Look, never mind the sales pitch, buddy," she hissed. "Just go and find out where he is. Quickly, I haven't got all bloody day!"

The security guard's head **tilted** slightly, giving him a slightly quizzical appearance. Only then did it dawn on Jessica that she might not be addressing a sentient life form. "Sorry if I have upset you in some way," it replied condescendingly. "I won't be long now."

Turning away, Jessica felt the color rising in her cheeks. Stamping a foot furiously on the ground, she cursed herself for not having been more observant.

A moment later, it was back beside her. "Second floor, 'A' wing, ward 'B' - bed 22," it informed her. "Would you like me to show you the way?"

"I'll find it myself, thanks," Jessica snapped ungraciously.

The paint on the corridor walls has seen better days, she thought as she walked across to "A" wing. Hope the wards are better kept. Otherwise - you'll probably leave here with more diseases than you came in with.

Twice, as she sought ward "B," nurses stopped her to enquire where she was going. "Security's pretty tight," she mentioned to the second curiously. "I hadn't realized there was a Juicer problem here."

"There isn't," the nurse told her bluntly, "we're good at keeping such idiots away from here."

"Just the same - once bitten, twice shy, eh?" The girl hadn't waited for a reply, or for Jessica to ask more questions. She was too busy.

A moment later, Jessica saw a directional indicator, pointing her in the direction of the ward.

* * *

Hargan looked up as the ward door opened to admit a pretty, blonde-haired woman. For some reason she looked familiar, although he couldn't remember having met her before. When she paused at the nurses' station, his interest faded.

Obviously, she was a member of the medical staff here. The fearsome Sister **Olga**, a seriously deranged individual, had warned him what would happen if he so much as cast an eye in the direction of one of the staff.

A moment **later**, he found himself looking up into the newcomer's emerald green eyes, as she paused beside his bed. "Do I know you?" he enquired, as he turned painfully onto his side.

Jessica smiled, pulling up a chair for herself before replying. "The name's Jessica, I pulled you out of the building yesterday."

Hargan looked at her. He noticed the soft American lilt to her voice, although he didn't recognize the dialect.

"Thanks."

"It was **nothing**..."

"Hey, lady..." Hargan interrupted, "when a stunning blonde pulls you out of a burning building — believe me, that is definitely something!"

Jessica blushed. "I just wanted to know that you were alright. If it hadn't been for the spotted woman and her children, I wouldn't have been there..."

"Hey, don't spoil it," Hargan interrupted her. "I was enjoying the idea of having you rescue me."

"Really... It was nothing," Jessica protested in embarrassment.

"Well, if that's how you feel about it! I owe you one though — I won't forget that."

"Maybe you won't have to."

"Name your poison, lady," Hargan replied ruefully. "Anything I can do for you won't be enough to repay the debt."

"It'll do for **me**," Jessica laughed. "I'm looking for a job, the wilder the better!"

Hargan looked at her with interest. "'Scuse me...the wilder the better, did you say?"

"Yeah, that's right. You know of something?" Jessica asked with rising excitement. "Or, somebody?"

"No," replied Hargan flatly. "It was just... just the idea that you hadn't had enough excitement already this week. What are you? Some sort of **masochist**?"

They chatted inconsequentially for several minutes, before Jessica stood up and made ready to leave.

A coughing fit shook Hargan's blistered body, as he lay there looking up at the her. For several seconds, his oxygen deprived brain threatened to plunge him into the **stygian** realms of the unconscious.

"Stay well," Jessica told him. "Though we might not meet again, it was good to know that you'd live a bit longer."

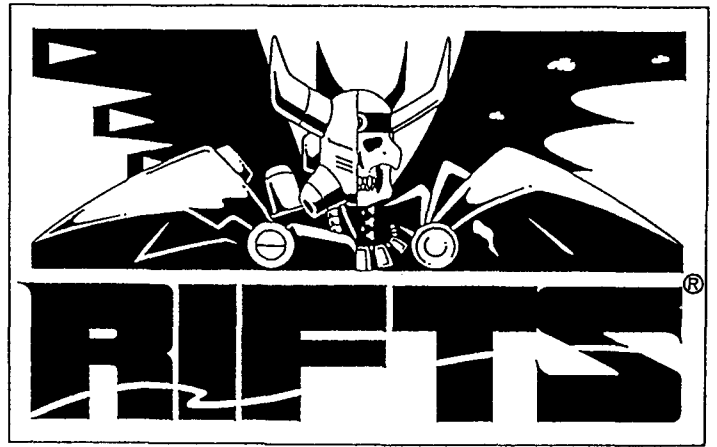
"Pity we didn't get to know each other better," Hargan replied as she began to move down the ward. "I love blondes!"

Jessica stopped briefly, and turned to flash a disarming smile in Hargan's direction. "I'm safe then?"

"Why's that," he called after her as she reached the doorway.

"I'm a redhead!"

Jessica was through the door, a broad smile lighting her face as she walked back down the corridor, before the import of her words registered on Hargan.



The Hammer of the Forge

By James M.G. Cannon

Chapter Seven

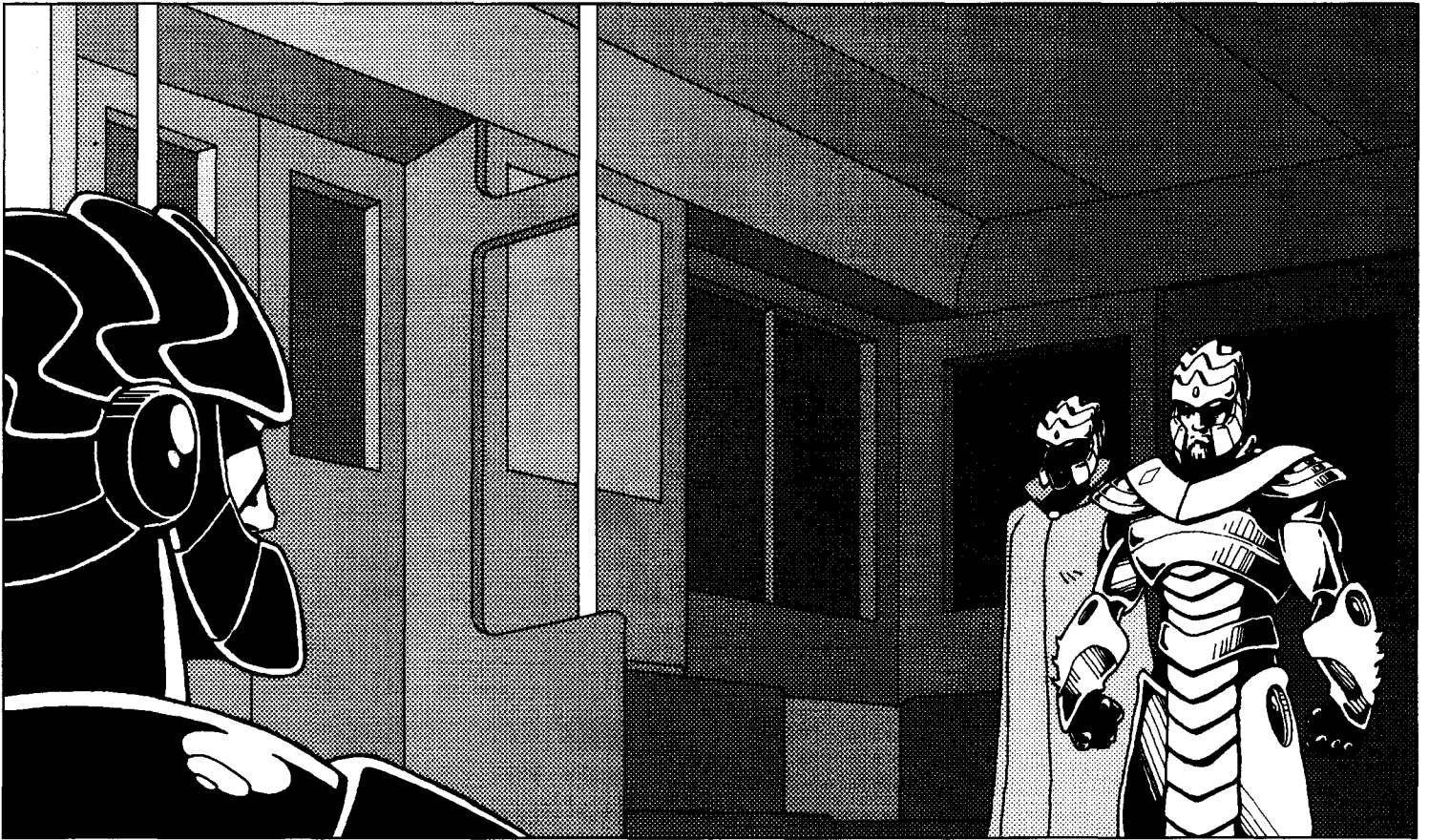
A Bustle in the Hedgerow

The Transgalactic Empire is a force for evil; few would dispute this. It controls a third of each of the Three Galaxies through martial power. Its armies march across a thousand worlds and subjugate a thousand peoples. A few rebels have banded together and now foment civil war in the heart of the Empire, but they are but a fraction of the TGE's population. Few outside the ranks of the **Cosmo-Knights** even try to check the TGE's expansion. The CCW vigilantly patrols the borders it shares with the TGE, but a non-aggression treaty keeps them from actively resisting the Kreeghor and their Empire.

The backbone of the Empire's might is its armed forces. The Imperial Legion is one of the most highly trained and harshly disciplined armies in the Three Galaxies. They have at their disposal vast engines of destruction that even the **Kittani**, for all their inventiveness, cannot match. A single **Doombringer** Dreadnought can lay waste an entire world, and Kamnos is but one example of that very happenstance; Imperator Assault 'bots have left smoking craters behind wherever they go. Yet for all their power, all their ingenuity, all the devastation they bring, the Imperial Legion and its weaponry cannot inspire the same abject terror in the Transgalactic Empire's subjects as a single Invincible Guardsman can.

The Invincible Guard is the elite regiment of the Empire, a band of misanthropes and monsters who so excel at dealing death and destruction that the Emperor rewards them by giving them powers and abilities far beyond the norm. In an attempt to duplicate the **Bio-Wizardry** of their old masters, the **Splugorth**, the Kreeghor who rule the TGE have fashioned a force of super powered operatives, answerable only to the Emperor himself. Some can turn their flesh to steel, others can **burn** through **starships** with a glance, or turn a man to ice in a heartbeat. The Emperor gives them free reign throughout the Empire. They live





like kings themselves, wanting for nothing, needing nothing, doing anything that pleases them.

One has to wonder, given that amount of power and that much freedom in such an autocratic society, why any one of them would even consider deserting.

— *excerpt from Travelogues of a Journeyman, by Fraktyr Quint*

Center's vast bulk loomed overhead, a crushing weight that reminded Elias Harkonnen why he hated being on the ground and preferred the freedom of the stars. He shifted uneasily in his tram seat, fighting a wave of panic that welled up unwittingly from his subconscious. He was fine, he told himself, sitting comfortably on the Number 10 tram as it glided across Level Six of Phase World's most famous city. Plenty of air, plenty of space between himself and the roof of the tram, and between the tram and Level Six's ceiling, and all the other levels above. He forced himself to take a deep breath, and flexed his fingers until his knuckles cracked.

He glanced out the window, to reassure himself of all the open space outside the tram, and saw a glimmer of his reflection in the Plexiglas. His narrow, Elfin face was drawn into a grimace, his white eyes narrowed as if in pain. The black skullcap on his head reflected the fluorescent lights of the tram, making it appear shiny and bright. He forced his features to relax, and then brushed a gauntlet hand across the skullcap, as if he could wipe the light away.

There was a commotion at the back of the tram, forcing the other occupants to move forward. Some even opened the connecting door and scurried into the car ahead. Elias turned in his seat to see what was going on; it would help keep his mind off his own problems. Like the Riathenor backing out of the deal, or the fact that Quajinn Huo was getting more suspicious each day, or that Thraxus still hadn't called.

Elias Harkonnen got his wish. As soon as he turned around, all his other worries vanished in an instant. For at the back of the tram car stood two Invincible Guardsmen, a human male and a Silhouette female. Both wore the trademark red and black armor of the Guard, the same armor Elias himself still wore though he had deserted over a year before. They were staring at him; the other passengers had noticed, and were moving out of the way as quickly as they could.

Elias stood casually and pushed his way through the other passengers to the open space that had appeared before the Guardsmen. Elias smiled slightly. He recognized the human. "Boreas, it has been a long time. What brings you here?"

Boreas was tall and dark, with a shaven head beneath his own black skullcap. As a mark of individuality, he had grown a beard across his chin, and threaded a gold hoop through his lower lip. "We're here on business, Elias," Boreas answered. "We happened to catch sight of you getting on the tram, though, and decided to see what you were up to."

"Same old, same old," Elias said. Boreas was a brick and little else; he could shift to a metallic state that gave him superhuman strength and durability, but he was land-bound and slow moving. He was also very vulnerable as long as he remained in human form. The Silhouette was the dangerous one; in addition to whatever abilities she had gained upon her transformation to an Invincible Guard, she would also have some magical skill. Elias' invulnerability was nearly complete, but magic still gave him pause. "I just get to pick and choose who I kill these days. Going into business for myself was the best thing I ever did."

"The Emperor doesn't see it that way," the Silhouette said slowly. Her voice was low and sibilant, and her fangs showed prominently when she talked. Her white eyes didn't blink. "You

betrayed him and the Empire," she continued. "And that cannot be forgiven."

Elias smiled. "Who wants to be forgiven?"

Faster than thought, Elias lashed out with one fist and caught Boreas in the chest. Boreas was in mid-transformation, so the blow didn't kill him, but instead sent him flying backwards. The door behind him folded like tissue paper and the Guardsman crashed to the floor of the other car. Metal squealed and sparks flashed.

The Silhouette screamed, and the force of the scream hit Elias like a battering ram. All around him, the Plexiglas windows shattered into a million shards that exploded outward, falling to the ground meters below like snow. The few passengers left in the car were hammered by the wall of sound, their own screams drowned out by the diabolic noise. The sonic scream should have shattered Elias as well, but he was tougher than his Elfin frame looked. He frowned and then jumped at the Silhouette, body-slammng her into the side of the tram. Stunned, her scream trailed off, and it only took one more blow to crush her head like a melon.

Elias was grabbed from behind and thrown across the car. He smashed through two seats before slamming into the wall and coming to a stop. Boreas was fully metallized now, and he looked very angry that his partner was dead. Too bad. Boreas let out a shout and lumbered forward as quickly as he could, hands outstretched to grab Elias.

Elias let him.

When he felt Boreas' hands close around his throat, Elias grabbed the Guardsman's belt and lifted. Both of them rose into the air and smashed through the roof of the tram. Boreas was a professional, though. He never let go, even as Elias carried him straight up, increasing his speed with every second. They crashed into the roof of level six at several hundred kilometers an hour, just short of a sonic boom, but the impact was enough to shock Boreas' hands loose. Elias let go as well and dropped away, leaving Boreas wedged into the metal plates of the roof.

"Come back here!" Boreas shouted, shaking with impotent rage. He hadn't looked down yet.

Elias shook his head. "I'll let you live this once, Boreas. For old times' sake. But if you come after me again, I won't be nearly as forgiving." He blasted away with all possible speed, leaving Boreas to figure out how to get himself down.

* * *

The Riathenor had ultimately decided to pass on joining Elias' band of raiders. Apparently he had some misgivings about working with Quajinn Huo. So be it. Elias could do without him. There were millions of sentient beings in Center with the right qualities Elias required; Riathenor were a dime a dozen anyway. A rarity, however, was a Fallen Knight.

The Knights that served the Cosmic Forge were said to be a singular breed, each one chosen by the Forge itself to oversee the well-being of the Three Galaxies and adjacent segments of the **Megaverse**. Life, honor, nobility, courage, courtesy and loyalty were the watchwords they lived by, even before they became **Cosmo-Knights**. Only the best and brightest in the Three Galaxies, those with the potential to be true heroes, were blessed

with the divine gifts of the Forge. The Cosmo-Knights, most believed, were perfect; even **Splugorth** Conservators would grudgingly admit Cosmo-Knights were a breed apart. But every few years or so, from out of nowhere would come a tale of corruption and greed, and a Cosmo-Knight would be the star player. The supreme power the Forge blessed the Knights with was as much boon as curse; it could corrupt even the most angelic of souls. And once rot set in, the Forge withdrew its blessing and cursed its former servant. He became a Fallen Knight, the lowest of the low. The worst sort of creature in the Megaverse, one who had tasted perfection and proven unworthy.

The existence of such a creature made Elias Harkonnen feel comfortable and warm inside. Pillars of justice and valor like Lothar of Motherhome made him uneasy, though he would never admit it to himself, but the presence of Fallen Knights proved that even those most loved by the Forge were **schlubs** and screw-ups every bit as common as the rest of the sentients in the Three Galaxies.

So Elias felt no qualms about tracking down the Fallen Knight who had appeared on Center days before. The short battle with the other Guardsmen had wiped away the insecurities that had bothered him recently, reminding him that he was the most dangerous being alive and someone with a future. The current setbacks were temporary; Elias Harkonnen would have his day yet. **Thraxus** would call soon, he was sure of it. And with the wealthiest man in the Three Galaxies signing the checks, Elias would be on the road to power.

The Fallen Knight, according to Squiddy, had appeared on Level Four, apparently Rifted in randomly. Most random Rifts opened up in the lower levels, and supposedly the Prometheans had safeguards in place to keep dimensional gateways from opening up in the populated areas of Center, but on this one they had miscalculated. Rumor had it that the **Naruni**, who owned most of Level Four, were screaming bloody murder at the masters of Center. Sure, it was only a Fallen Knight this time, but what if next time it's a New Olympian raid? Elias could almost sympathize with the Naruni. Almost. They were the most well armed force in the Three Galaxies; they could easily fight off anything that got past Promethean security. But they liked to complain.

The Naruni were also a bit put out that the Fallen Knight, after his unprecedented arrival, was able to slip past both their security network and the Prometheans to escape into the lower levels. The Knight had evaded capture, but the brotherhood of informers and spies that fueled the real business of Center — intrigue — tracked him to Level Eight. The Fallen Knight took up residence in a flophouse a few blocks from the Rat's Nest, the headquarters of the Society of the Knife. Word had it that the Knight was killing time with booze and prostitutes until something better came along.

Leaving the site of the battle, Elias headed towards the nearest checkpoint down to Level Seven. He had been toying with the idea of finding the Fallen Knight all day, but the altercation with Boreas and the other Invincible Guard made him decide to finally do it. At best, he might find a new ally, and at worst he would be able to pound on the Fallen Knight for a bit and work out some aggression on a deserving target.

The trip down to the eighth level was largely uneventful. In a city as large and cosmopolitan as Center, even an Elf in Invinci-

ble Guard colors drew scant attention. Most people on the lower levels knew not to stare anyway; usually they were trying to avoid attention themselves. They went to the lower levels to procure drugs, prostitutes, and assassins, or for other less than legal activities. As crazy as the upper levels could get, where even a **Splugorth** like **Klynncryth** could hold court, the lower levels tended to be worse. Much worse.

Level Eight was home to the Society of the Knife, the most powerful underworld organization on the planet. Below them, on the ninth and tenth levels, were the sewers and dungeons of Center, where the detritus of a million worlds squatted in their own filth and preyed upon one another. Death was easy to find down there, and life the cheapest commodity available. As bad as the TGE could be, and **Elias** was well acquainted with the evil and corruption of the Empire, there were parts of Center that were far worse.

He navigated his way through the city streets, stepping over bodies and around mounds of trash, ignoring the squabbles that erupted around him unless a stray bolt of light came too close or a bully boy felt like giving **Elias** a hard time. He took care of each problem quickly and efficiently as it arose, and then continued on his way.

He found the flophouse easily enough, a sad and battered three story shack with a name in Trade Four emblazoned in red neon over the front door. There were advertisements for live shows, nude girls, and other less savory attractions. **Elias** curled a lip in distaste but stepped inside without hesitation. The interior was dimly lit, a small room with doors on the far side leading to the showroom, and stairs leading up to the private rooms. A young tough in battle armor leaned against a wall, spinning a blaster lazily in his hand. Women of various species lounged around trying to look enticing and failing miserably.

Elias made his way to the bouncer, who eyed him coldly. "I'm looking for the Knight," **Elias** said. It was hard to believe that even a Fallen Knight of the Forge could end up in a place like this. **Elias** could smell at least seven types of narcotic in the air, and other less identifiable odors. He decided not to stay longer than was absolutely necessary. For a moment he entertained the notion of tearing the building apart, but that would have gotten his hands dirty.

"What Knight?" the tough asked. The blaster was held loosely now, but in a position where it would be easy to blast **Elias** between the eyes. The kid was obviously looking for a payoff. **Elias** wasn't in the mood.

He reached out and grabbed the pistol, but not quickly enough to keep the kid from pulling the trigger. A beam of light glanced off **Elias**' forehead and the skullcap sizzled. **Elias** grimaced and crushed the pistol to powder. The bones in the boy's hand crunched with a loud crack. "I'm not in the mood for games," **Elias** growled.

"203," the tough howled, tears appearing unbidden in each of his three eyes.

Elias released him and let him collapse to the floor, cradling his broken hand. **Elias** surveyed the rest of the room, saw no one was eager to make trouble, and then took to the stairs. The place was too cheap for an elevator.

There were strange stains on the hall of the second floor. A green skinned humanoid was passed out in the middle of the

hall, and **Elias** couldn't tell if it was alive or dead. It smelled dead, but that could have been its natural odor. One could never be sure on Center.

He found 203 easily enough and rapped on the door. There was no response. He struck the door harder this time, causing it to shudder and threaten to buckle. He was rewarded with the sound of movement from within. After a moment, the door eased open a crack, and a bleary, red rimmed eye peaked out at him. The eye widened in surprise, and then the door swung entirely open, revealing a pale skinned human in rumpled clothes, unwashed and reeking of alcohol. Several days' growth of beard marred the strong chin, the blue eyes were bloodshot, and the black hair was pasty and sticking to the skull. If this was the Knight, he had been on quite a bender since arriving on Center.

"May I come in?" **Elias** asked.

The man nodded and stepped back from the door, sweeping an arm out as if to invite him inside. **Elias** took a cautious step within, and almost withdrew. The room was worse than the man. Bottles were strewn everywhere, most empty but a few half full. Many of them had been shattered, thrown against the walls, ceiling, or floor to spread glass and stains all over the room. The furniture once consisted of a dresser, night stand, and bed, but sometime recently it had all been shredded down to fragments. Sheets, chunks of mattress, and bits of clothing had been wadded together in the center of the room to make some sort of nest. Without windows or ventilation of any kind, the room reeked of stale alcohol, unwashed bodies, and urine. **Elias**' boots stuck to the carpet as he stepped inside.

The man picked a bottle up off the floor and shut the door. He took a swig from the bottle and gestured for **Elias** to have a seat. "Oops," he said **drunkenly**, "no more seats."

This couldn't be the Knight. This was a broken shell of a man, who had ripped himself apart and now beckoned death with a freshly opened bottle. Even in defeat, a Cosmo-Knight remained an arrogant twit. Not a broken down loser.

"Are you the Fallen Knight?" **Elias** asked anyway, just to be sure.

The man nodded. He looked at the bottle in his hand and suddenly threw it across the room. It shattered against the wall, spilling alcohol and bits of glass onto an already cluttered floor. "Used to be somebody," he muttered. "Now I'm just nobody again."

Elias' eyes narrowed. "Prove it," he said.

The man's blue eyes met **Elias**' white ones, and **Elias** saw some spark still remained within him, buried deep. But it was there, for a moment, and then quickly subsumed by the booze and the pain. "What do you care?" he muttered, swaying.

"I'm here to help," **Elias** said. "But I won't help you unless you show me who you really are."

The drunken man eyed him dubiously for a moment, and then staggered over to his nest. He reached into the sheets and pulled out another bottle, this one fuller than the last. He looked at the bottle for a moment, and then turned to **Elias**. "You want to see what I really am?" **Elias** nodded. "This is what I really am," the man said, spreading his arms to encompass the room. "A failure. A deadbeat. A drunk."

This was a waste of time. **Elias** turned to go.

"Wait," the man said as **Elias** gripped the doorknob. "You look familiar. Where have I met you before?"

Elias shook his head. "I don't have time for this, and I don't **find** you the least bit amusing."

"Seriously," the man said. "You're that Elf. The one from the TGE . . ." The man trailed off, and Elias paused at the door. The man looked at the bottle in his hand once more, and then dropped it into the nest. He held his hand up and out, as if reaching for something. A beam of blue energy materialized between his fingers, solidifying into a metallic blue longsword. "It's all I have left," the man said. His voice was noticeably stronger now, and he seemed to straighten as Elias watched.

"I can get drunk now," the man continued. "But not for long; my body is still resistant to toxins and it cleans the crap out of my system faster than I can put it in." He looked up at Elias. "You are **Elias Harkonnen**, late of the Invincible Guard. I recognize you now that the haze is clearing."

"You do know **me**," Elias realized. "How? Granted, I'm the only Elf to make it into the Guard, but few outside the TGE are aware of that, much less my name." Would he have to kill this poor fool after all?

The man slashed the air with the sword, and then brought it to his side so he could lean on it as if it were a cane. "You and I share an enemy," the man said. "One of my former allies, one of my former brothers."

"**Lothar**," Elias said bitterly.

"What? The Wolfen? No, not at all," the man said. "Lothar may loom large now, but he will soon be eclipsed by a brighter star, an **Earthling** named Caleb Vulcan. Ten years from now, he will destroy both our lives."

"Vulcan?" Elias said. "Never heard of him. What nonsense are you babbling about?"

"It isn't nonsense, Elias. I admit it will be difficult to believe, and perhaps impossible to substantiate, but it isn't nonsense. I'm from the future. I've traveled back in time to get my revenge on Caleb Vulcan, to the time when he was just a novice, untrained and unsure of himself." The man shook himself. "I've been sitting in this flophouse for days waiting for you to show up."

"From the future?" Elias smiled. The man was insane. "Right. Even Temporal Raiders can only speed up time's flow, they can't reverse it or travel backward."

"There are beings in other dimensions who surpass even the Temporal Raiders when it comes to manipulating **chronal** flow. I stole an artifact from a few of them who call themselves Time Lords, and I was able to pass backward through time. It has been a long journey, and I wasn't even sure if I had made it to where I needed to be until I recognized you."

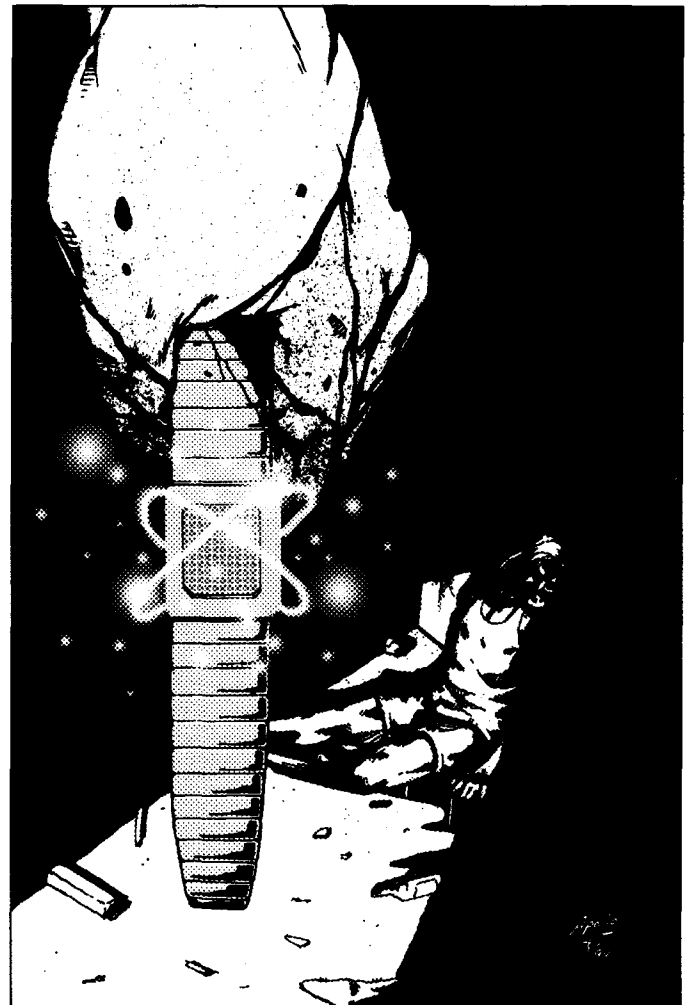
Elias was intrigued, despite himself. "How is that?" If the fool really did possess a time machine, then Elias could certainly find a use for it himself.

"You've only ever made two trips to Center," the man explained. "And since you still have your left eye, I'm certain this is only the first one. I must be at about the right place in time."

Left eye? "Is that right?" Elias said. "Well, you have done an excellent job then, because this is my first trip to Center. I don't mean to press the issue, but do you happen to have any proof? Like the artifact itself, for example?"

"Of course," the man said. He knelt down near his nest and rummaged through it for a few moments. At last he stood up and held out a primitive looking wrist chronometer. The lens was cracked, but Elias could see numbers ticking away. "It's called the Cosmic Quartz Digital Watch. Not much to look at, but it gets the job done." When Elias reached for it, the man yanked it back. "Oh, no you don't. You look with your eyes, not with your hands."

That was it. Elias had had enough. He stepped forward and kicked the sword out from under the man's hand. He stumbled and fell, but Elias caught him by the wrist. As the man recovered and prepared to swing the sword at Elias, the former Guardsman pulled with all his strength and tore the man's arm out of its socket. Blood sprayed in a fountain, bathing Elias and splattering all over the drunken man. He screamed and somehow found the strength to slash at Elias with the sword; it couldn't cut his skin. Elias backhanded the man across the face, and he went sailing through the air to crash into the wall. The sword spilled from his fingers.



Elias held the arm out and opened the hand, spilling the Cosmic Quartz Digital Watch into his own palm. It didn't look like much, but if it truly was an artifact, **Quajinn Huo** would be able to tell. He put the chronometer in one of the pouches on his belt and then reached down to pick up the sword. It had a good balance and, he could tell with a glance, a keen edge.

The man — Fallen Knight indeed — was struggling to get to his feet, blood spraying from him in spurts that matched the beat

of his heart. His eyes blazed with cold fire, as if he wanted to blast **Elias** with energy beams, but in falling from the favor of the Forge he had lost that ability. **Elias** calmly walked up to him and buried the sword in the man's neck.

When he was dead, **Elias** took the sword with him and left the room.

* * *

Elias headed back to the apartment he rented on Level Six, threw the sword and the stolen chronometer on the bed, and checked his messages on the wall monitor. The **Monro** information broker **Squamato Kekkil Damathui**, better known as **Squiddy**, had left a message fifteen minutes before. **Elias** queued up the playback and stood back to watch.

Squiddy's rotund, monocular face appeared in the screen. "Out and about, **Elias**? Well I hope you get in quick, because the boss man doesn't like to be kept waiting. There's a warehouse on the corner of Rosenberg and Finin on 4-B, in the name of **Kralizec Industries**, but it's owned by the man in the white tower. Be there by 0200 hours, or he'll find a new employee. Take care." The image fizzed out and the tape rewound itself.

Elias couldn't resist grinning like a jackal. Finally, an interview with **Thraxus**. He checked his own chronometer and noticed he had less than a half hour to reach the **Kralizec** warehouse on time. He checked himself in the mirror; most of the blood stains were cleaned off, at least, though a few remained here and there. He didn't have time to clean up. **Elias** cracked his knuckles and hurried out the door.

Level Four was equally divided between the **Naruni** and the **United Worlds of Warlock**. While the **Naruni** owned the section referred to as 4-A, the **UWW** maintained control of 4-B. On paper, it was a friendly and easygoing relationship, but the reality was vastly different. The technocrats in 4-A hated the mages of 4-B, and vice versa. The border between the two sections was heavily patrolled by both **Repo-Bots** and other **Naruni** enforcers, and the highly trained marines of the **United Worlds of Warlock's** stellar navy. Conflagrations were unavoidable, and every few weeks a fight would erupt between the two. The **Prometheans** kept a close eye on everything, but only intervened if the safety of the city itself was in question.

Business as usual in Center.

Elias took the express up to Level Four, but was slowed by the authorities who insisted on picking through everyone's papers with a fine-toothed comb. As it was, **Elias** noticed several members of the **Society of the Knife** slip through, and of course **Elias** himself was allowed onto the floor. The **Prometheans** were difficult to understand, in **Elias's** estimation. They tried to protect the city, yet they didn't seem to care too much about the well-being of the city's inhabitants. They turned a blind eye to slavers like **Klynncryth** or the **Kreeghor**, ignored the stockpiling of munitions and illegal business dealings of the **Naruni**, and allowed virtual free reign to intergalactic criminals like **Quajinn Huo** or the **Spiral**. Yet if anyone attempted to usurp the **Prometheans's** control of the city, the **Prometheans** would mass in force and destroy any and all opposition. Murder a woman in cold blood on the tram, and the authorities didn't care. Knock down a wall without a permit and they swarmed like hornets on honey.

Prometheans made **Elias** edgy, because he couldn't figure them out. And if you couldn't figure someone out, you never knew what they might do in a given situation. That made them dangerous. So **Elias** tried to steer clear of them as much as possible, and when they proved particularly supercilious in their duties at the checkpoints, he played along. The fact that their phase powers rendered his invulnerability a moot point helped keep him docile as well. He hated feeling impotent, and hated the **Prometheans** for making him feel that way, but he couldn't do anything about it. Yet.

By the time he worked through the checkpoint, he had ten minutes left to find the warehouse. With so much riding on the meeting, he decided to quit playing it safe and took to the air to canvas the level, searching for the right streets. He found **Rosenberg**, and almost followed it too long in the wrong direction. By the time he realized it and doubled back, he was skirting the deadline very close. He found the corner where it met **Finin** with seconds to spare, and dropped to the ground to burst into the warehouse itself just as his chronometer turned over to 0200.

He hoped it wasn't slow.

The interior of the warehouse was huge and dark and apparently empty, save for a pool of light near the center of the main room, lit by a hovering glow globe. **Elias's** hackles rose, but he ignored his feelings of unease and sauntered toward the circle of light. As he approached, a hologram flickered to life beneath the glow globe.

It showed a human male with a slight build, fair skin and dark hair slicked back tight against his skull. His eyes were shadowed, but his mouth formed into a generous smile. He was dressed in a tunic of deep violet edged in gold with a matching cloak and boots. He stood easy and relaxed, holding a mug of something that sent plumes of steam wafting into the holographic air. He didn't look like the richest man in the **Three Galaxies**, but then **Elias Harkonnen** didn't look like the most dangerous man in the **Three Galaxies**, either.

"**Thraxus**," he said, stepping into the circle of light. It wasn't a question.

The hologram inclined its head. "I apologize for not meeting you in person, **Mister Harkonnen**, but I am in the midst of preparing a party for the evening and I simply could not get away."

Elias shrugged. **Thraxus** didn't sound like the most ruthless businessman in the **Three Galaxies** either; he sounded more like some fop with money to burn. "This is fine with me," **Elias** told him. "As I understand it, you've got a job that needs doing."

"And you're just the man to do it, are you?" **Thraxus** asked. He sipped from his beverage as **Elias** wordlessly nodded. "I must admit you come highly recommended," **Thraxus** continued. "And my own investigations into your background have led me to believe you know what you're doing when it comes to mayhem. Perhaps I could use you. But I never hire anyone without a proper interview." He paused, and the reached out with his holographic hand to do something that the projector didn't pick up.

Elias heard servos whine somewhere within the warehouse, and the rumble of a very large door opening. **Elias** folded his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "What kind of an interview?" he asked.

The hologram shrugged. "The usual. A monster loose in the warehouse, attracted to this light, coming to kill you. Escape is impossible, blah, blah, blah. If you are who you purport to be, then you should have no trouble at all." **Thraxus** spoke in a mild, almost bored tone.

Elias could hear the lumbering tread of something large and heavy moving in the darkness. A biped from the sound of it, but with the glow globe so bright **Elias' Elven** nightvision was ruined. He couldn't see the creature yet. But given what part of Center he was in, he could guess that he wouldn't like it, no matter what it might turn out to be.

"Please don't let it be a dragon," **Elias** whispered to himself. He shifted into a battle stance, preparing himself for defense or attack as the thing approached.

Despite himself, he could not stifle an involuntary gasp as the creature stepped into the light. It was humanoid and huge, nearly twice **Elias' height**, and apparently skinless, leaving its massive muscles raw and red looking, and that much more frightening. Its most prominent features were a pair of gnarled and scarred horns thrusting out from each side of its head with a combined span of nearly twelve feet. Smaller growths budded off from the principal horns like thorns, and smaller horns erupted from the creature's skull in place of hair. Four tiny, pig-like eyes looked out over a gaping maw ringed with teeth, that dripped with saliva and some pinkish froth. A pair of tentacles burst out from where the ears might have been, each with its own red eye and toothy grin. The huge hands were balled into horny **fists**.

"It's called a **Thornhead**," the holographic **Thraxus** explained in the same mild tone. "Not very bright and easily irritated. It feeds on psychic energy primarily, but needs to digest solid food along with it."

"KILL YOU," the **Thornhead** roared. "EAT YOU!"

"See what I mean?" **Thraxus** said.

Elias ignored them both, and launched himself forward, blasting into the creature at several hundred kilometers per hour. It lurched backward, staggered by the blow, but the tentacles seemed to have minds of their own and they snapped at **Elias**. One bit air, but the other one latched on to the shoulder pad of his armor. The creature's piggy eyes narrowed and the huge hands came up to grab **Elias**.

He blasted away and out of the thing's reach, but his shoulder pad was ripped free by the tentacle's mouth. It spat the metal on to the floor with a clang, and a moment later two bursts of green and blue fire erupted from the creature's palms. **Elias** dodged easily in midair and then slammed into the **Thornhead** again, this time aiming for the waist in an effort to tackle it to the ground. Massive as the monster was, it could not resist **Elias' superior strength**, and it crashed to the floor with a howl.

Elias landed lightly on his feet near the creature's head. As it rolled over to get up, he grabbed one of the thorny horns and braced himself against its shoulder. With a tug, the horn cracked and broke free. **Elias' own momentum** pulled him to the ground, but he bounced back to his feet as the **Thornhead** found its own footing. It was wildly unbalanced now with only one six foot horn sticking out of its head, the other a shattered stump. The weight of the single horn dragged the creature to the left, and it tried to right itself without much luck. The two tentacles spit and hissed at **Elias**.

Elias held the horn like a club and slammed it into the **Thornhead's** side with a meaty thunk. It howled again and tried to blast him once more with a fireball. **Elias** let the magical attack slam into him and wash over him, scarring his armor but hardly fazing his invulnerable hide. He struck the **Thornhead** again, and when it stumbled to one knee, he started swinging at the head. Again and again and again.

Elias recovered himself slowly. He looked at the horn in his hand, caked with blood and brain matter, and then at the headless carcass at his feet. He threw the horn to the ground with a clatter, and turned to the hologram. "Did I pass muster?" he asked.

The hologram nodded. "You're not even breathing heavy, are you?"

Elias shrugged. "Not much of a workout. What's the job?"

During the melee, **Thraxus** had put down his cup and now folded his hands before him. "A simple matter for one with your talents, I assure you," **Thraxus** said. "You are familiar with the CCW world **Dellian-4**?"

Elias nodded. **Dellian-4** was the home of the **T'Zee**, a race of short humanoids with few manners and a great deal of aggression. They were quick breeders, though, and had **overpopulated** their world, destroying its ecosystem and covering even the ocean floors with huge cities to house their ever growing population. Civil rights abuses were a matter of course on **Dellian-4**; with so many people, the worth of a single life was **startlingly cheap**. Despite that, the Consortium of Civilized Worlds turned a blind eye, because the **T'Zee** were geniuses of nanotechnology. Though the CCW tried to project an image of harmony and equality, **Elias** knew they were as corrupt as all the rest. **Dellian-4** proved it.

"The **T'Zee** have no agriculture to speak of, having replaced the fields with city streets ages ago. For food they rely primarily upon outside help and the seven distribution centers scattered around the world. Every day, each distribution center manufactures several million tons of a nutritious paste called '**burl**,' packages it, and sends it out to the stores. The wealthy elite and military are able to eat real food brought from off world, which they keep well away from the common folk."

Elias nodded. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"Each distribution center is the size of a small city in and of itself. Each one is powered by a fusion reactor. Security is tight, but not very observant. A fellow like you shouldn't have too much trouble blowing each of them up, one by one."

As **Elias** suspected. "It will be difficult, yes, but not impossible. With the amount of risk involved and the preparations to be made for such an undertaking, I'm going to need a great deal of **money**."

Thraxus shrugged. "What is money? I'll offer you five hundred million to start, and if you do well, I may throw in a bonus, as well as offer more work."

Five hundred million credits? He could buy a whole frigate with that much money. He could replace the **Raptor** and the asteroid base and still have enough left over for a small moon.

"I'm in."



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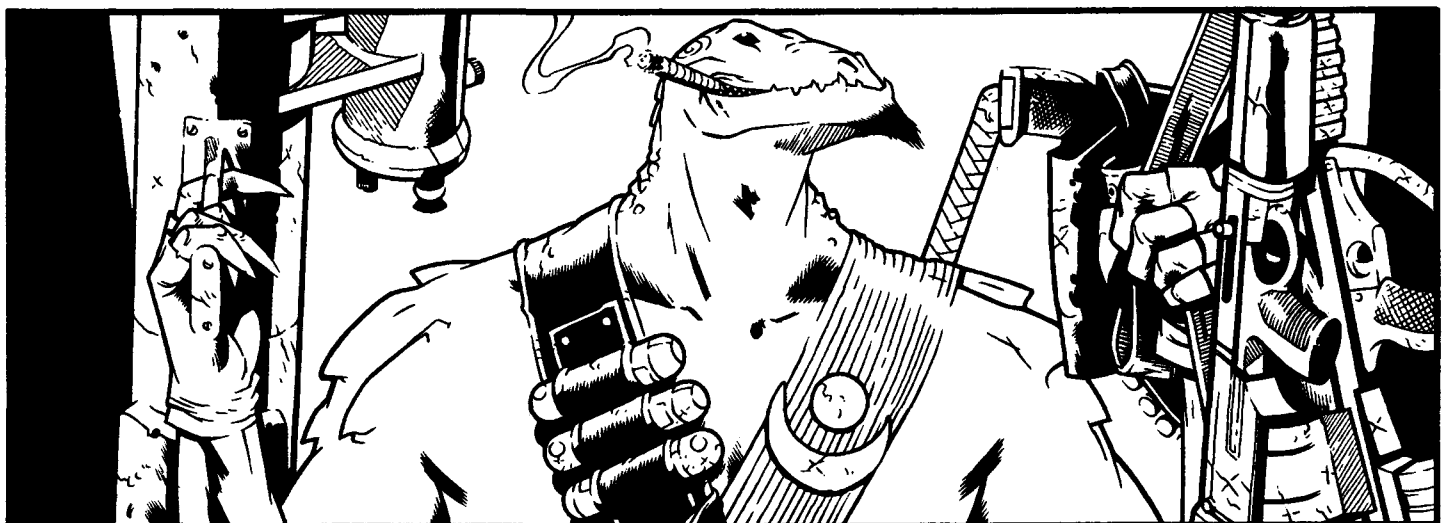
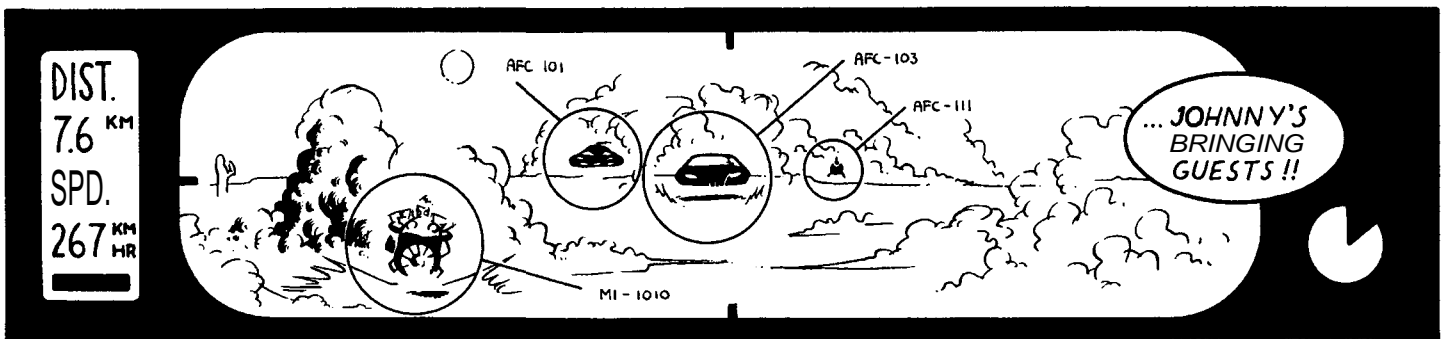
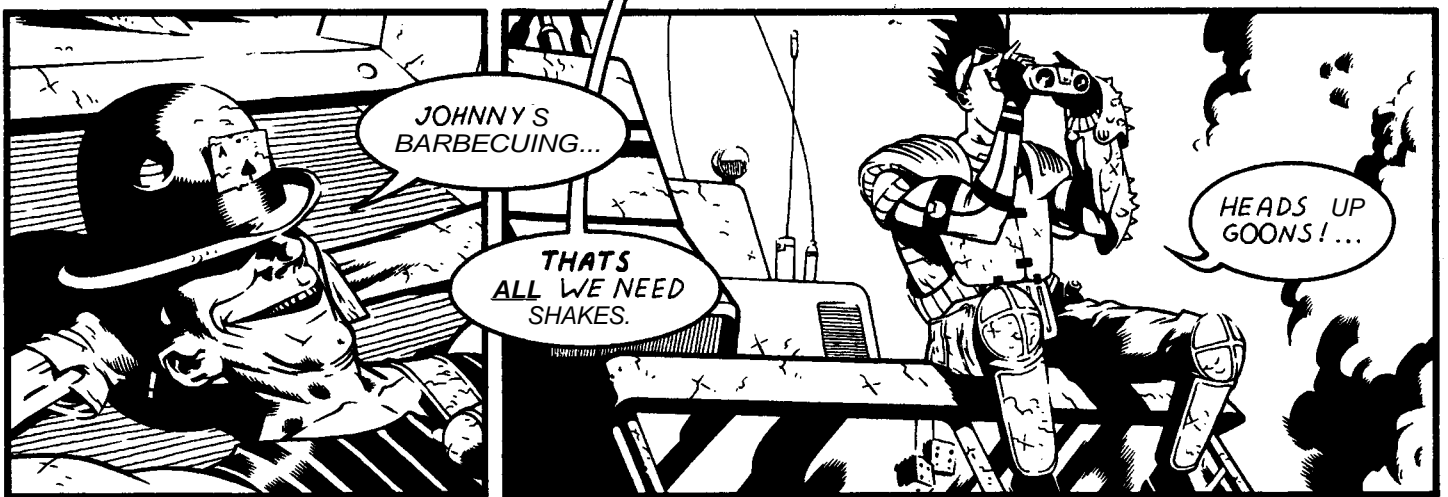
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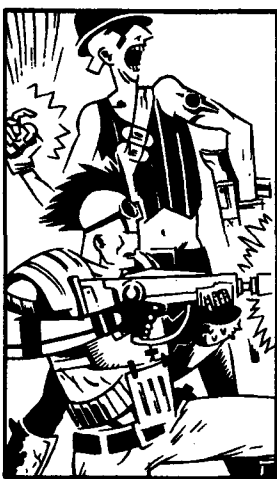
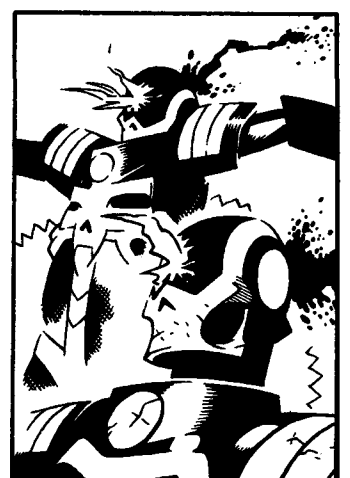
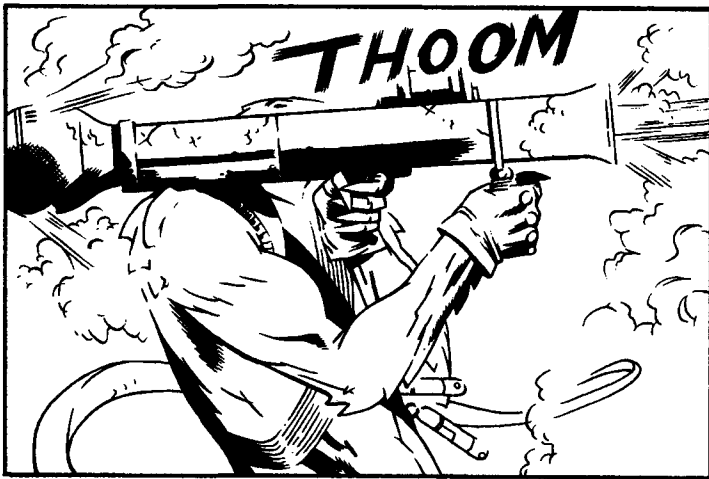
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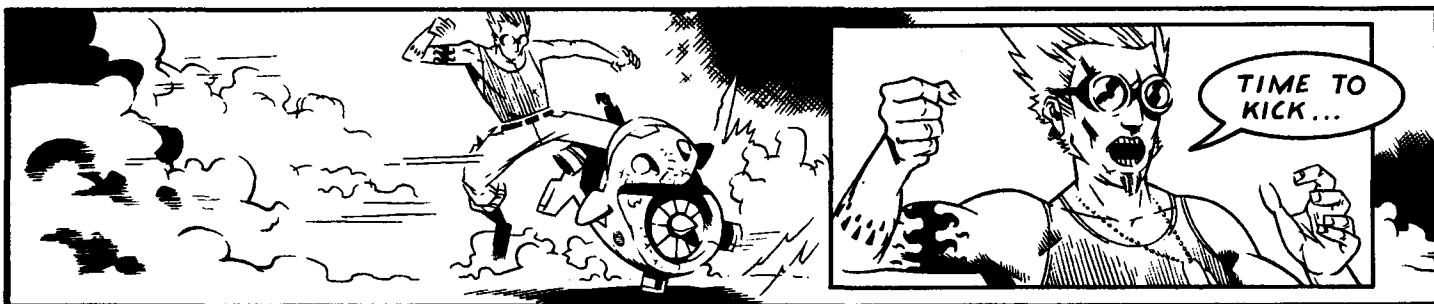
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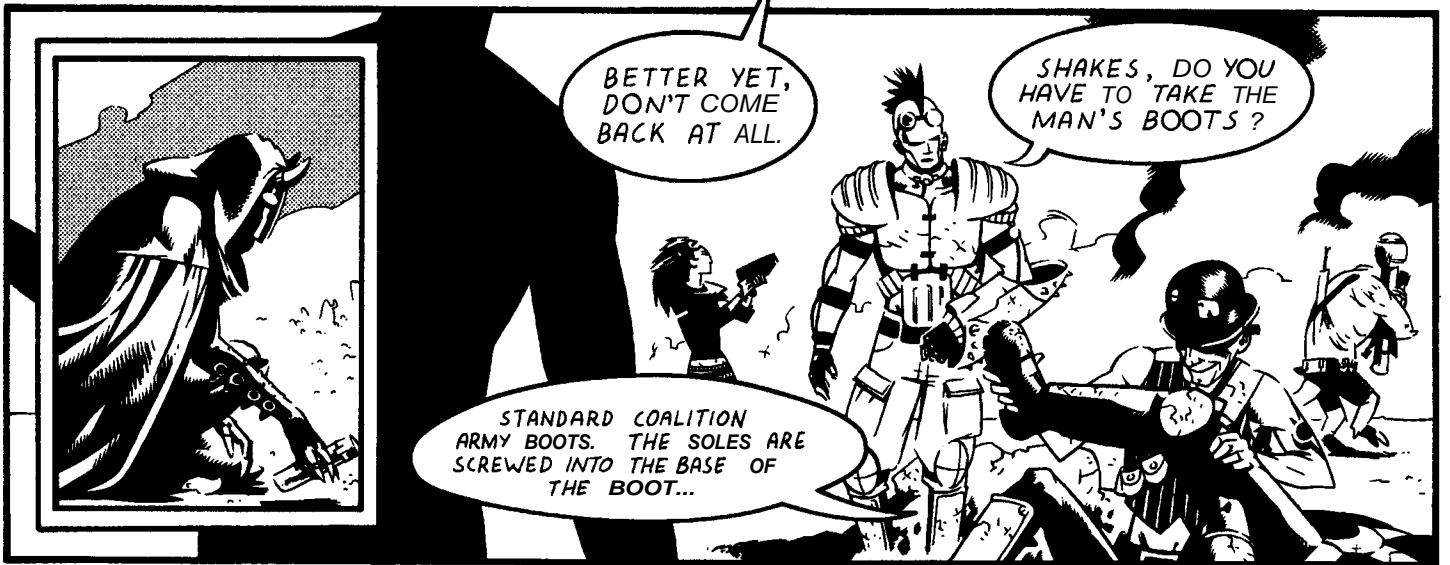




YOU'RE WELCOME, JOHNNY.

NEXT TIME TRY BRINGING A LITTLE COMPETITION WILL YOU ?

DEAD!
ALL DEAD!!

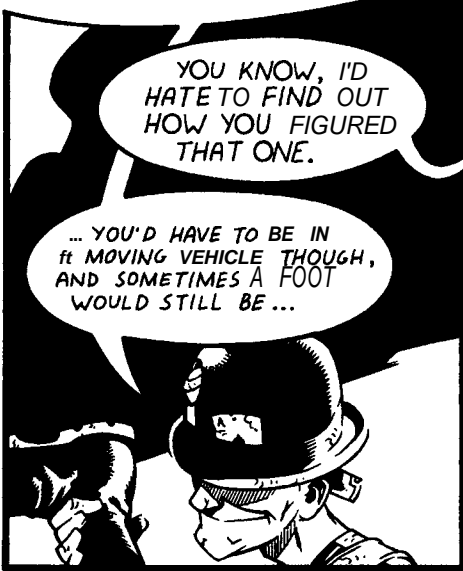


BETTER YET, DON'T COME BACK AT ALL.

SHAKES, DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE THE MAN'S BOOTS ?

STANDARD COALITION ARMY BOOTS. THE SOLES ARE SCREWED INTO THE BASE OF THE BOOT...

YOU COULD KNOCK A MAN RIGHT OUT OF HIS BOOTS IF YOU HIT HIM WITH ENOUGH FORCE...

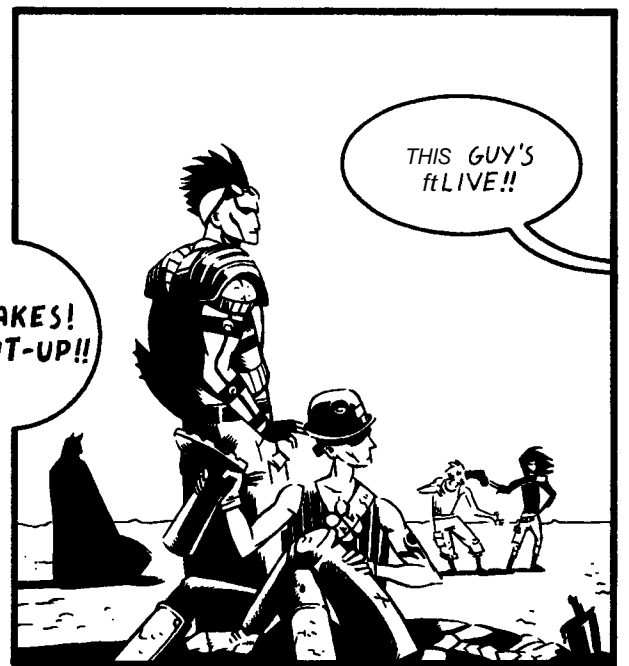


YOU KNOW, I'D HATE TO FIND OUT HOW YOU FIGURED THAT ONE.

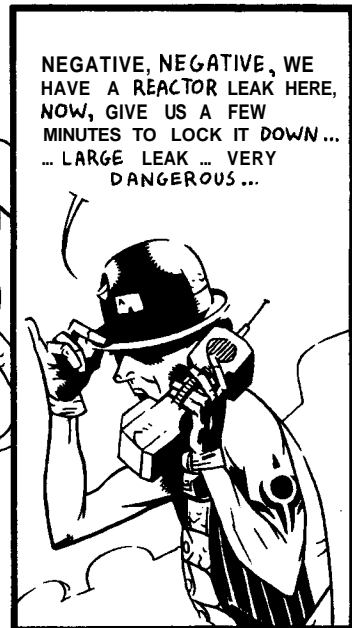
... YOU'D HAVE TO BE IN A MOVING VEHICLE THOUGH, AND SOMETIMES A FOOT WOULD STILL BE ...



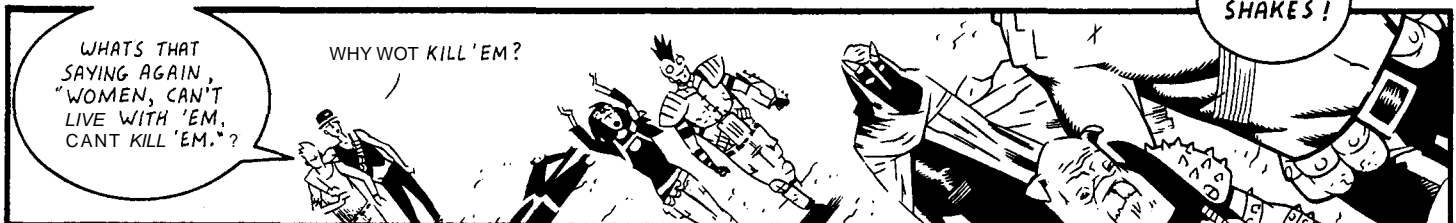
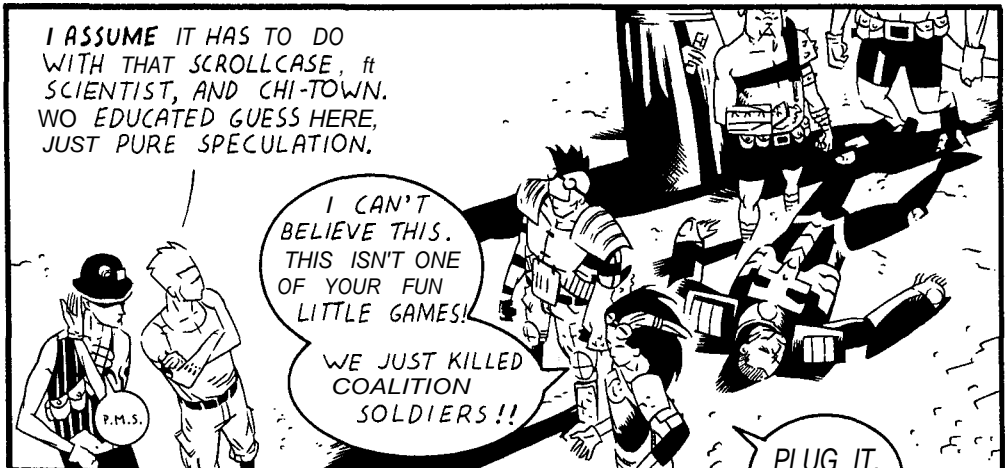
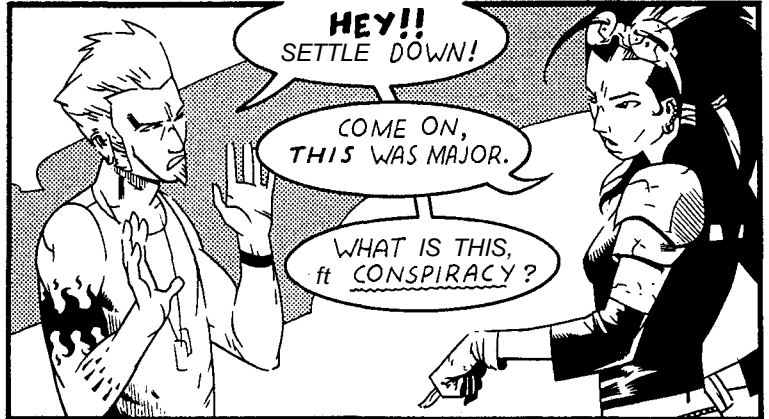
SHAKES!
SHUT-UP!!



THIS GUY'S ftLIVE!!







LATER, INSIDE THE MOUNTAINEER A.T.V. AFFECTIONATELY NAMED PETUNIA...



SO, WHAT IS IT ?

LOOKS LIKE SOME KIND OF OLD GENETICS BLUEPRINT.

OH, VERY GOOD BOWIE. THAT WOULD EXPLAIN THE WHOLE 'SCIENTIST' THING.



... COULD THIS SPECIES STILL EXIST ? HOW DID THEY GET HERE ??...

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM ?

WE NEED TO FIND OUT WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT.

WHAT EXACTLY DO YOU MEAN BY "FIND OUT"?



WE ARE GOING TO THE LONESTAR COMPLEX.

'SCUSE ME, WHAT !?

WHAT!? WHY? WHY SHOULD WE PICK UP AFTER LITTLE JOHNNY ADVENTURER HERE ?



SOUNDS LIKE SUICIDE TO ME.

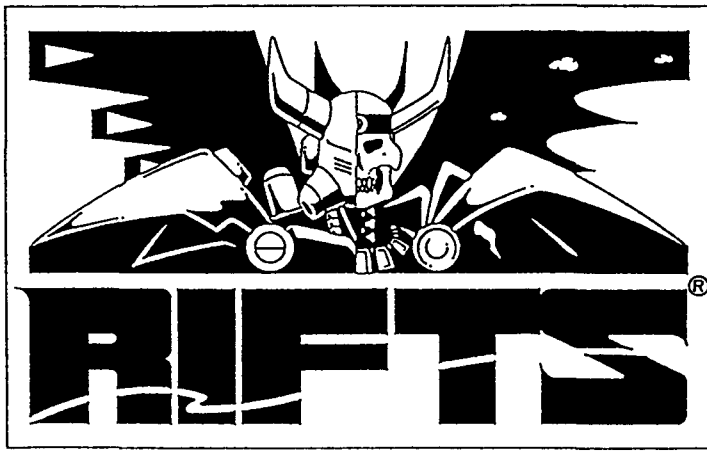


IF «T IS WHAT I THINK IT MIGHT BE, SUICIDE WILL BE A BLESSING...



BODAKHAN, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT ?

TRUST ME.



The Siege Against Tolkeen

By David Haendler

Chapter 24

"Oh, damn it!" muttered Jack Perrin, his eyes fixated on the pyramid, still intact after the bombing of the century. "Why the hell didn't that thing **EXPLODE?!!**"

"**Betcha** that our ride out of here ain't coming," said Possman solemnly, unscrewing the top of a hip flask. "In other words, we're screwed."

"Is that all you can think **about?!!**" snapped Perrin angrily. "Tolkeen has an invincible super-weapon which may be capable of wiping humanity off of the Earth, and you're just angry that our ride never showed up! Where the hell is your loyalty, **buddy?!!**"

"Look, jerk!" yelled Possman, grabbing Perrin by the pilot's jacket. "I've got every bit as much loyalty as you do! But I've got friends back home who're wondering about me now! They don't know whether I'm alive or dead, whether I'm a hero or in a torture camp, and I would very much like to see them and tell them I'm okay! Being happy about being trapped behind enemy lines is not my idea of loyalty! Stupidity is more like **it!!!**"

"Where do your friends live, Hubert?" asked Perrin. "Do they live in Chi-Town? Do they live in the Burbs? Do they live in ANY Coalition State?"

"Yeah," replied Possman defensively. "They live in Level 26 of Chi-Town. What's your point?"

"Do you cherish **them?!!**" Perrin hissed. "Do you want to keep them safe?"

"Of course. Again, what's your point?"

"Well, come summer solstice, they're going to be atomized along with **EVERYONE ELSE** in **Chi-Town!!** Unless that pyramid gets taken down, your friends are going to die! And from where I stand, it looks like behind enemy lines is the best place to be if you want to destroy that **pyramid!!!**"

Possman looked into Perrin's eyes for a moment, not saying anything. He then pulled out a hip flask, and began to unscrew the top. "It has been a **BAD** day," the ranger muttered to him-

self, as he took a big gulp of the booze. Just then, there was the sound of laser fire, and a beam of pure energy cut into his back. Possman fell to the ground, his back on fire.

"Got Mm!" said the skinhead triumphantly from the rooftop. He pulled his laser **rifle's** scope up against his right eye again, and focused on Perrin's forehead, as the pilot tried to scramble to safety. "Pity my juiced-up buddy couldn't be here to see this."

"Keep it up, moron," laughed the Juicer, from an even taller rooftop nearby. He held a submachine-gun in one of his hands. "Keep it up, keep it up. I'll be a hero for offing the traitor who shot our beloved leader."

"Bloody hell!" snarled Perrin, diving beneath a pile of garbage in the side of the alleyway. "Who **IS** this guy?" He then pulled a holdout pistol of his own, and began firing away at the sniper. Still, he knew that he was in deep trouble. He was pinned down, had an inferior weapon, and was **unarmored**. Things looked bad.

"What **th**?" grunted the skinhead, as he saw a new adversary enter the alleyway. It was a Super SAMAS, although it didn't look so super at the moment. Most of its armor had been destroyed, its jet **thrusters** were a smoking mess, and its pilot was moving around like he was drunk or dazed. Still, its weapons systems still looked to be operable.

Instinctively, Donald Hartman opened fire on the sniper with his plasma cannons. There was a roar of energy, and the sniper (as well as most of the rooftop the sniper was on) evaporated. The SAMAS pilot then extended an armored hand to the man cowering behind a pile of refuse. "Jack Perrin, I presume?" Hartman asked, and then passed out.

"Oh, **geez,**" muttered Possman as he got to his feet. "My back is killing me!" He then looked around the alleyway. The building behind him was demolished, there was a beat-up Super SAMAS lying prone on the ground, and Jack Perrin was standing behind a pile of garbage holding a smoking pistol. "What happened here?"

"You got hit with an energy weapon," said Perrin. "Why aren't you dead?"

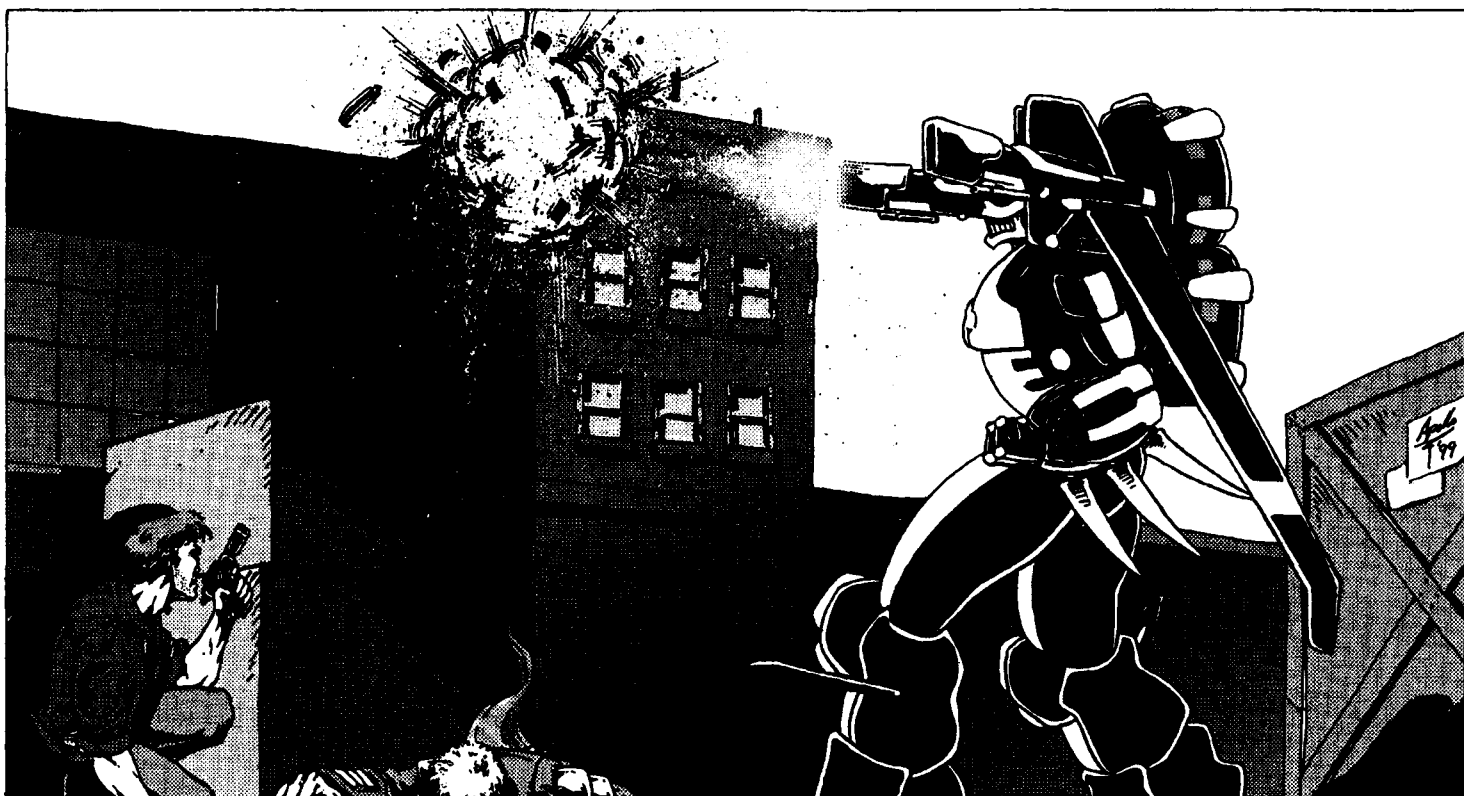
"You can thank our friends east of the big pond for that," said Possman. "Those folks at **Triax** make great armor clothing."

"I've got to get myself some of that," remarked Perrin casually. "Now let's get this **flyboy** on his feet, and then get the hell out of here. The cops are spread thin today, but I'll wager that a laser battle will probably draw a few of them."

Meanwhile, a sniper who had never fired a shot leapt away into the darkness, vowing that next time he would strike Perrin down personally.

* * *

Miles away, in a darkened room, sat the leaders of humanity in North America. The Emperor and his son sat at the head of the table, with their personal guards standing behind them. In the center of the table was a holograph projector, which projected a recording of the battle in static-filled black and white.



"What are our options?" asked the Emperor gravely. "I don't want to throw away more pilots and planes on another futile frontal assault."

"We don't have many, sir," said an Air Force commander. "Our ground forces can attempt a blitzkrieg, but that might be..."

"That might be suicide!" barked another general. "Those woods are full of booby-traps, Golems, and snipers! Even if our men did get through there with minimal losses, the perimeter is so well protected that the ground troops would be slaughtered by the..."

"Shut up, defeatist," said the crown prince sharply. "I want to know the projected capabilities of that weapon. Dr. Emil, what do you say?"

A robotic, pathetic figure shambled into the room. Dr. Emil Halstrom, formerly of the Federation of Magic, had been one of the world's premier theoretical mages, and a famous philosopher to boot. But he had been careless, and was captured by the Coalition while on his way to a conference in Lazlo. Halstrom's magical knowledge was too great to waste, so he was not slaughtered like most captured mages. Instead, he was brain-washed and drugged into total compliance. As a final precaution, his brain had been put into a faulty, experimental Borg body, to prevent him from casting magic.

"Pyramids are very...versatile...structures," he rasped, in his tortured, mechanical voice. "They can do many, many things, from opening Rifts to prolonging life. However, this pyramid is...different. Note...note the orbiting crystals. They seem to be...containing some form of energy. The...weapon...most probably operates by releasing that energy...destructively."

"So why haven't they already?" asked the elder Prosek. "What's keeping them?"

"The...energy...must be hard to control. If they rush into releasing it...without having accumulated enough power...Tolkeen

would almost certainly be destroyed...by its own weapon. They must wait for the next...solstice."

"How can we shield our troops from this energy?" asked a general. "And how powerful would you suppose this energy is?"

"At its highest effects...magic can do vastly more than...mere technology. It takes us...years of research and billions of credits...to make a single Firestorm base. But...beings such as dragons...which are equally powerful to a Firestorm...are commonplace. Magic can open Rifts between dimensions, raise the dead, make gods. Science can only...make roads, prolong death...slightly improve men's bodies. The closest that...man...ever came to magic...was the creation of the atomic bomb. The...atomic bomb remade magic, reopened the Rifts. It was...science's greatest hurrah..."

"I've heard enough of this heresy!" yelled Victoria Langsford, the Chief of Science in the Coalition. "This madman is comparing science to lunacy! I will not stand for it!" She was suddenly silenced by a wave of the Emperor's hand.

"Sit down, Victoria," said the elder Prosek gently. "Let Halstrom speak."

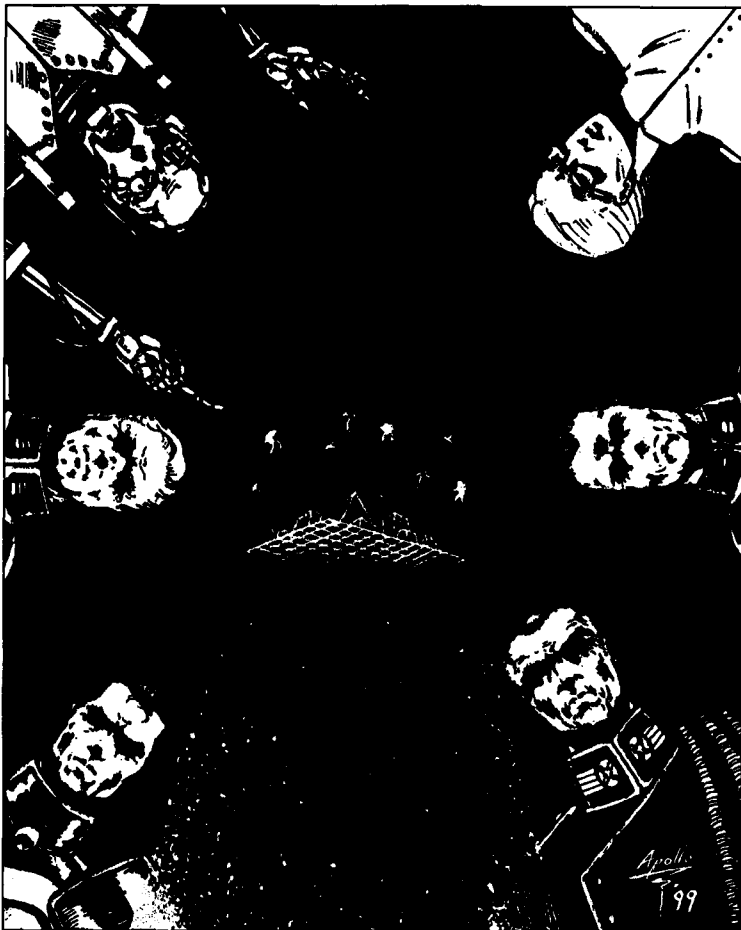
"Thank...thank you, your highness. As I was...saying...the nuclear weapon was the pinnacle of science, science's greatest achievement. And apparently...the men of Tolkeen...wish to outdo science once again. I believe that the pyramid is a...magical counterpart to the...nuclear weapons of the Golden Age."

There was a stunned silence. The younger Prosek was the first to regain his composure and speak. "The atomic bombs of the Golden Age reshaped the entire Megaverse. And you're saying that the magicians of Tolkeen have created something even more powerful."

"Exactly...sire. It may...destroy the Coalition...reshape the world...or destroy the universe. Maybe all of the above."

"We have no choice then," said the Emperor gravely. "We must destroy Tolkeen before they can reach the next solstice."

Divert all available troops from the battles of Free Quebec to the siege against Tolkeen. The rebels of Canada are of little concern when compared to this menace."



Chapter 25

"I dunno, sir," said Donald Hartman anxiously as he and Perrin drove through the streets of Tolkeen at midnight. "Isn't this unbelievably illegal? I mean, even associating with Naruni Enterprises makes you a **criminal!** Letting them get their hands on power armor technology's even worse."

"First off," said Perrin, lighting up a cigarette. "Do you see any police around here? You, me, and that Possman guy are probably the only representatives of the Coalition in town. I'm not going to report you, Possman isn't going to report you, and you aren't going to report yourself."

The pilot paused for a moment to dodge a huge chunk of rubble in the road. It would be weeks before all the damage from the CS bombing could be cleaned up, and repairs would take months. Some alleys and side streets still had unclaimed corpses lying around.

"**Second,**" said Perrin. "We've gotta get your SAMAS repaired. I don't feel like going to the registered repair shops in town, because they'll turn our butts in. These Naruni guys are the only people in town who'll repair your rig and won't report it. At least, they're the only ones I know of. And you'll forgive me for not wanting to spend weeks tracking down a good black market robotic chop shop."

"Yeah, I know, but..."

"And last, we need your SAMAS in working order if we're ever going to take that pyramid apart. We succeed in this, and we'll be heroes. They aren't going to pester heroes about unauthorized **mehc** parts. And if we fail, we'll be dead, so it doesn't matter what the Coalition high brass thinks."

The road ahead was fairly free of rubble, so Perrin took his eyes off the road for a moment to look over his new recruit. Hartman was a black man, with the typical athletic build and short haircut of a Coalition pilot. There was a datajack on his left temple, his eyes looked like they might be artificial, and his left arm seemed to be a slightly different shade from the rest of his body, making Perrin wonder whether or not it was a bio-replacement limb. Hartman still wore his uniform pants and boots, although they were spattered with motor oil. The white **T-Shirt** which he'd borrowed from one of the HFA punks bore the proud logo, "**Xiticix suck.**" Above the words was a **cartoonish**, badly drawn picture of a decapitated insectoid.

"Not too many blacks in the CS air force," Perrin remarked, trying to make small talk. "Ever had anyone be a prick to you because of it?"

"Nope," replied Hartman. "You'd be amazed how little the color of your skin counts when your skin's sheathed in power armor."

"Can't argue with that," said Perrin. "Here's our stop." With that, he eased their **hovertruck** into the open door of a large, unmarked garage. Inside, all manner of electronics and robotics equipment lay scattered about. Several robots, in various stages of repair, sat stoically, supported by mechanical harnesses. There was a calender featuring a nude, blue, mouthless D-Bee woman hung up on a wall.

Perrin and Hartman stepped out of their truck, just as a greasy workman of the same race as the lady in the picture stepped out of his office. "Well, Mr. Perrin," the creature said, in a nasal voice, glands on the side of his neck opening and closing as he spoke. Drool dripped down from the openings, further dirtying the oil-stained floor. "The local sales rep told me that you'd be stopping by for an estimate. What can I do for you today?" The mechanic seemed inordinately cheerful. It annoyed Perrin.

The sky cycle pilot opened the back of the hovertruck, exposing the prone, broken Super SAMAS. "We need this fixed up," Perrin said. "Mr. Hartman here can tell you exactly what he wants done. And tell me how much it'll cost before you start work. I don't want to be saddled with a bill I can't possibly afford. I've heard how Naruni Enterprises works."

"Mr. Perrin, you wound **me!**" said the D-Bee excitedly, feeling up the damaged power armor as if it were a lover. He had wanted to get his hands on something like this for ages. People in Tolkeen didn't want technology. They wanted wizardry. The most he ever got was damaged labor robots and the occasional security drone. It would be a pleasure to work on a sophisticated combat machine for once.

"So how much will it cost?" asked Perrin critically, folding his arms across his chest.

"I'll have to do a diagnostic," the D-Bee said. "**Lemme** go get the loader." He walked into a side room. A few moments later, he returned, clad in a framework of whirring, clanking armor. With the enhanced strength that the suit provided, he easily pulled the Super SAMAS out of the truck and into a harness.



"It'll take a few moments to load up," the mechanic said, furiously pressing buttons on a small computer terminal. "This is one of the more elaborate machines we've had in here for months. The nanites in the terminal have to get used to this

thing. While we're waiting, you wanna tell me what kind of improvements you want made?"

Hartman uneasily thought things over for a moment, then stepped up to the D-Bee. *God, it's uncomfortable being near one of these things*, he thought. "I want the head of be reconfigured to look like a dog's head instead of a skull," he finally forced out. "My last squad was called the Black Dog Squadron. It's sort of a memorial to them."

"What kinda dog?" the D-Bee said casually, taking down notes on a handheld computer. "Like a rottweiler or something?"

"That would be fine. Also, I really need the flight pack to be working again. Flying is a big part of my combat style."

"That's a problem. We don't have many flight pack parts here, at least not high quality ones. I could order them, but it would have to be imported from another dimension. That'd take at least three months, and would cost a hell of a lot. The other solution would be for me to use the parts we have here. That would cost less, but would make a LOT of noise when you turn it on. Don't go for stealth."

"That's okay, I guess. But in that case, I'll need powerful speakers. I like to play music during battle. Sort of a tradition."

"You're in luck. I stock the best speakers that you can get in North America." There was suddenly a loud beeping noise. The D-Bee turned to his diagnostic computers. "Hmm, pretty bad," he said, stroking his angular, blue chin. "The armor plating is useless. I'll have to add completely new stuff. Lots of electronic damage too. No major systems are down, though, so that's good."

"Tell you what," the D-Bee said, suddenly even more energetic. "There's some experimental parts lying around that I've been wanting to test. Let me install 'em, and the entire repair is free. You just have to do some paperwork after the suit's been in a few brawls."

"What are the parts?"

"Nothing too unusual. Brand new, laser resistant armor plating. Some more efficient electronics systems. And a pair of giant-sized plasma cartridge revolvers."

"Deal!" said Hartman, shaking the mechanic's hand.

The two humans got back in their **hovertruck**, and began to pull out of the garage. The D-Bee mechanic waved to them. Perrin reflected on how the man would most likely be dead if their mission succeeded, and smiled softly.

"See you later!" said the mechanic happily. "My children will be thrilled to know that the Coalition's local branch has appointed me their top mechanic!"

Suddenly, at the mention of the D-Bee's children, Perrin felt a sharp pain in his chest, like a flaming dagger of magic probing his heart. A moment later, he realized that he was feeling guilt, an emotion which was usually alien to him. Self-pity and loathing were the scars which he bore, not guilt. At least, that was what he had always thought.

* * *

The psychopath was having a bad day. Everything seemed to be going wrong. He walked through the rubble-strewn streets

sadly, like he was attending a midnight funeral. If only it was a funeral! A funeral for the entire city of blasphemy. The psychopath looked up at the defiant, evil pyramid, and spat. His mouth tasted of bile.

A group of about twenty beings suddenly turned down the alley, and began walking in his direction. They were demons, no doubt about it. Their horns, their tusks, their scales, their robes, all confirmed it. Even those who looked outwardly human or even appealing, stank of evil. Skeletons, the walking dead, followed their inhuman masters.

The psychopath began to tremble slightly.

"Renounce life and live forever!" chanted the group, as one. "Embrace death, and forever live! Renounce death, and forever die!"

The psychopath's left cheek began twitching wildly.

Their leader, a witch no doubt, festooned in the vestments of evil and insanity, cried out, "Those who wish to survive the Coalition's invasion, believe in us. For only by forsaking such mortal concepts as the continuation of life can they expect to rejoice when their deaths come! Only those who are prepared may bask in the glories of the next world!"

Bitter tears began to run down the psychopath's cheeks. He could not restrain himself. To do combat with such powerful demons would mean certain destruction. Yet, if he did not challenge them, was he a worthy servant of good?

One of the demons, a lizard dressed in the clothes of a man, walked up to the killer. "Would you like some literature on the Church of the Skull and the Pentagram?" it asked, in a soft, appealing voice. The voice of the devil. "We believe that..."

The voice of the D-Bee was cut off by the harsh squeal of twin **Vibro-Blades** activating. The maniac withdrew the swords from underneath his baggy overcoat, and then the devil was in two pieces. Strength filled the psychopath's limbs, and he leapt into the crowd of monsters, his blades leading the way.

Chapter 26

"This is bad," said Possman, anxiously looking through his macrobinoculars. "This is very bad." He paused for a moment to adjust the video transmission device on the binoculars. "You getting my transmission, boss?"

"Sure am," replied Perrin. He and half a dozen assorted members of the HFA were gathered at their headquarters, staring at a laptop computer screen. The fuzzy, black and white images were hard to make out, but they could be amplified and studied later. "Tell us what you're looking at, Possman," the pilot said into the headset microphone he was wearing.

The CS Ranger looked back out the window of his parked van. He thanked the heavens for the van's tinted windows, which hid him from the searching eyes of the guardsmen. "To begin with," he said. "It looks like they're beefing up the security at the pyramid. I can see two barbed wire fences being built, with a nice dead zone in between. They've already finished a concrete wall, 'bout maybe 10 feet tall, right around the pyramid's base. There's guard towers on that wall every 15 yards or so, but they're unmanned right now."

"That stuff we can make out clearly," said Perrin. "What about the guards? We can't get such a great picture of them at the moment."

"They ain't from around here," Possman said. "It looks to me like most of them are **Brodkil** and Gargoyles. They've all got heavy-duty bionics, and are packing rail guns and plasma axes, the likes of which I've never seen."

"Atlantean?"

"Or European. Either way, it means that the dragon's taking security seriously, if he went to the expense to import D-Bee meres from those far-off places. These guys must be real expensive. I can see a couple of medium-sized combat robots patrolling behind the concrete wall, and some things that look like dragon dogs running around between the fences. Most of the guards are patrolling outside the first fence, but I can see some of them on the wall."

"Is there a gate?"

"Yeah, there's some gates. But they're not in a straight row. You'd have to get in the first gate, run 50 or 60 yards to the second gate, and then run back 50 or 60 yards to the third one. Gives the guards in the towers and on the walls plenty of time to draw a bead."

"Any air defenses? Maybe we can nail these sons of bitches from the sky."

"Looks like the best bet to me. I don't see any anti-air guns. Doesn't mean that they aren't there, though. Those Air Elementals that wrecked our **flyboys** are probably patrolling the skies somewhere."

Perrin shuddered for a moment. "Those things'll be hard to kill," he finally said. "But we can do it. If we strike hard and fast, we can kill them. Anything else?"

Possman did another cursory scan with his macrobinoculars. He was about to say that there was nothing else, when he saw something else. It was a D-Bee, floating above the concrete wall. Most of the thing's body was concealed under billowing black and red robes. The only things which could be seen were half a dozen yellow spines protruding from its shoulders, and its gaunt, jaundiced, noseless face. He looked at the **monster**, and the monster looked right back at him. "I'm getting out of here, boss," Possman said, putting the macrobinoculars down.

"Wait a minute!" said Perrin. Suddenly, there was the sound of wind rushing. Possman screamed, his cry accompanying a demon's howl of rage. There were the sounds of a struggle, and then only the sound of the demon's heavy breathing remained. Suddenly, the monster picked up the macrobinoculars. It looked into the device, smiled, and then crushed the binoculars in its bare hands. Static filled the computer screen.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the bowels of the grand pyramid, a heated argument was progressing. Shaard sat imperiously in his mammoth throne, grinning as only a dragon can, while three of his human lackeys cursed at him. "I don't trust these mercenary scums!" cried out one of them, an old woman. "They'd betray us in a moment for more money!"

"Not likely," laughed the dragon. "The Coalition States will never deal with Gargoyles. And who else would have both the money and the inclination to bribe them into betraying us?"

"That's another point I wanted to make!" barked the old woman. "I can't believe the enormous expense of transporting

these...these rabble....from Europe, and feeding them, and paying their salaries! The treasury's nearly bankrupt, and the war won't be over for months, providing your pyramid works! The interest alone from the loans which we've taken out drives the debt up ten million credits every week!"

"I am displeased to hear that," said the dragon. "Who negotiated those loans? That person should be ashamed of himself."

"You know damned well that I, as the Treasurer, have to secure these loans! And they were the only terms that the bankers would accept! I did the best I could. It's your expenditures which are the problem, not..."

"It's your inefficiency that's the problem here!" replied the dragon. "Get out of my sight. I am the lord of Tolkeen, and I will not hear your treacherous mumblings. Tell the bankers that the interest owed to them is reduced by half, whether they agree or not!"

Suddenly, a Gurgyle dressed in freshly-shined body armor walked in. "An enemy spy has just been apprehended," he said, standing at attention. "Lord **Krann** wanted to know whether or not you wished to attend the interrogation."

"I most certainly do!" replied Shaard happily. "You see?" he asked the sorcerers. "The mercenaries have proven their worth already!"

* * *

On an abandoned, rubble-strewn street in Tolkeen, the corpses of twenty unfortunate cultists lay, orange blankets draped over their lifeless bodies. They had put up quite a struggle, but had been unarmed and **unarmored**. Their battle against an augmented, combat-ready foe had been an exercise in futility.

"What a waste," said Pete **Fransisco**, looking down at the bodies. "Who were these guys?"

"The Church of the Skull and the Pentagram," said his Wolfen partner, Lucius Mallen. "A benign death cult. They thought that death was some sort of cosmic re-alignment, and for their sakes I hope they were right. They practiced a little Necromancy, but had a registered license for it. Their skeletons, which also got trashed, had been scanned and bar-coded at the Department of Magic Registration. Totally legal organization."

"Looks like the psycho didn't appreciate them, legal or not," said the Mystic, looking under one of the blankets at a skeleton. "Hey, look at this," he said, pointing to its **fractured** skull. "Looks to me like the thing's been head-butted."

"So?" asked the Wolfen.

"So, all registered skeletons have a 3-D computer model of their skulls on file at the DMR. We compare these fractures to the computer model, and we've got ourselves a picture of the psycho's forehead and maybe some of his face. Have somebody take this in to the crime lab for re-scanning. And let's check under the fingernails of the cultists. Maybe somebody scratched the killer before he scratched them."

"Shouldn't we wait until **Uziel** shows up?"

"No, I'd like to get this done without her. That seraph gives me the willies," said Fransisco, looking over the hands of a corpse.



Chapter 27

"Who were you spying for?!" demanded the demon mage, its voice both smooth and menacing. "Out with it, scum!"

"I wasn't spying for anyone," Possman growled, his mouth full of blood and his hands manacled above his head. "I'm just passing through Tolkeen."

"Passing through Tolkeen in a parked, stolen van outside the Great Pyramid, with a pair of macrobinoculars and an unregistered laser pistol?" laughed the demon. Then, its countenance turned back to rage. "Enough with your lies!" the monster yelled, slapping the ranger's face with its clawed hand. There was a sharp, sudden pain in the side of Possman's head, and he nearly passed out. When his senses cleared, he could feel blood pouring down the injured side of his head. He was practically bleeding to death under the torture.

"Screw you," said Possman, and he was struck again. And again. His senses were beginning to slip away from him, and he felt certain that the monster was planning to murder him. Strangely enough, he felt little fear or apprehension. He felt defiant.

"Stop it!" barked another being, just entering the torture chamber. Possman looked up, and saw a newcomer, a pale, regal man wearing a bright purple robe. There was a large, heavy

kit in one of his hands, which the man seemed to have no trouble carrying. The ranger knew that most men would have been unable to lift it with two hands, let alone carry it with one.

The newcomer put the metal box down, and opened it up. Inside were sterile, glittering instruments of torture, as well as medical equipment. "You'll kill him," the man said. "Death may come eventually for this one, but only after we have shattered his will and stripped his mind of its secrets. He was foolish enough to be captured, and now he must face the consequences."

"It'll be a long time coming, **Shaar**," said the demon mage casually. "Can't you just get one of your Mind Melters to pull the secrets out of him?"

The newcomer shook his head. "I'm planning on making an example out of this one. I want him to admit his secrets while being videotaped. That will be broadcast all over Tolkeen, to scare his co-conspirators and anyone else who would stand against me. It will do no good to have some psychic inquisitor in perfect health and sanity telling how miserable the prisoner is. The words must come from our friend here's own lips. Besides, I want to test these new devices that Alistair Dunscon gave to me."

"Not a chance," said **Possman**, blood and saliva running down his chin. "I'll never give in."

"We'll see about that," said the dragon, extracting a small device from the kit. It was made of metal, and had a long, tapered body ending in a small sphere. The dragon gently brushed the sphere against Possman.

"Ooh, real scary," said Possman. "I don't feel **anyth...**" Suddenly, he convulsed in pure agony, as pain shot through his body. It felt like his blood had turned to razors. When at last the pain ceased and he was able to think again, Possman realized that he was sobbing uncontrollably. "**Wha...wu...cuk...yuh,**" he groaned.

The ranger's mind shot back to his training in the Coalition. There had been a section on how to resist torture. You were supposed to think all the time of a happier place, and imagine yourself there. That would keep you sane, and keep you from telling. With all his mental endurance, Possman imagined himself in a brothel full of beautiful women, all of whom desired him. He thought of the tender caresses of the women, of their sweet kisses...

And then the agony enveloped him again, pulling him out of his fantasy. When it subsided enough for him to think, he re-immersed himself in thoughts of the women. But it didn't work. The real **world...the pain...intruded**. That tactic would be useless for him. He switched to another one.

During his training, Possman had been told that it was the duty of every prisoner to try to escape. That is what he would do. He would concentrate all of his mental energy into devising an escape route, and that would keep him sane.

The demon plunged the wand of agony back into the ranger's body, and pain shot through every nerve and fiber in Possman's brain. He thought of how glorious it would be to shove that wand down the demon's throat. He thought of whether or not one of the torture implements might serve as a lock pick. Because once he had a lock pick, the demon would die. Possman spit out a tooth, and smiled evilly.

* * *

"So this is the plan for getting in," announced **Perrin**, before a council of the HFA's most experienced **headhunters** and tacticians (there weren't many). "Snipers take up positions on nearby rooftops, and take out the guards on the outermost perimeter. Once they're gone, a team of flyers coming in at relatively low altitude starts dropping explosives down into the innermost perimeter. Once the enemy units there are gone, we airlift the snipers in, bypassing the middle perimeter. I don't want to have to waste ammo on the guard dogs."

"That'll give us access to the door. A team of our most elite troops goes in, while the others man the guard towers. When enemy reinforcements show up, they've got the fences and the dogs and our men to deal with."

"Our special ops troops get the job done inside the pyramid. Most likely they'll have to kill the members of the Grand Council, to keep the mages from casting their spells. We're looking into simpler alternatives, though. Once they're done, the troops come out, and help man the ramparts against the reinforcements. Specifically, they guard 122nd street. Because the APC that's going to get them out of there will tear down 122nd street, plow through the fences, and blow a hole in the wall for them to escape through. The men get into the APC and take off, escorted by our remaining flyers. At the first opportunity, the men eject and the personnel carrier self-destructs. They then make their ways through the back streets and sewers to our meeting place."

A slim, heavily-cybered man in his late forties, wearing an overcoat two sizes too large for **him**, stood up. Perrin recognized him as a noted terrorist and mercenary from the New German Republic. This man had evaded NGR manhunts dozens of times, and even the CS once or twice. That had been in his glory days. Now, the man had fallen into drink and despair after the death of his squad. "You ask the impossible," he said in faintly accented American. "The only flyers we have are a few men with jet packs, and **Herr Hartman's** damaged Super SAMAS. That is not nearly enough to ravage a gargoyle fortification. Gargoyles are unglauiblich strong creatures. To kill a force of them of this size, we will need at least vierzig combat-ready power armor troops."

"How much is vierzig?" asked Perrin. "You're in America, sir. Speak American."

"Forty," said the man after a moment of recollection. "I need to brush up on my American, just as you need to brush up on your knowledge of our **forces!**"

"Don't worry about it," said Perrin. "I can get enough power armor units in time. And Hartman's SAMAS should be ready in a few days."

"And where is this APC so critical to your plans?"

"I can get it."

Rick Freedom raised his hand. "Magic is an inherently evil and unpredictable thing," he began. "Who knows what awaits inside the pyramid which so epitomizes the occult? How do we know the raging forces inside will not consume our courageous men the second they step inside?"

"We don't," replied Perrin. "Not yet, anyway. But I'm planning some ... surveillance which will give us more information on the interior of the pyramid."

"More **surveillance?!'**" yelled a gang leader. "Wasn't that ranger's death enough for you? Their security's too **friggin'** good."

"One man dies, and you want to call off all our further surveillance? This is war, princess. People die. You don't have to like it. God knows I don't. But you have to accept it." The image of his wife flitted through **Perrin's** mind for a brief, painful moment. He dispelled it with some reluctance.

"Is everyone satisfied with this plan?" **Perrin** asked.

There were grumbles of discontent.

"Does anyone have a better plan?"

There was silence.

"In that case, meeting dismissed."

Chapter 28

"Awesome," said **Hartman**, nearly breathless, as he reveled in the sight of his Super **SAMAS**. The power armor was now a gleaming black, with slightly glowing red eyes. The head had been completely reconstructed to resemble a snarling rottweiler dog with rows of tiny blades for teeth. The hands had been enlarged and the fingers elongated, to better grasp the enormous pair of revolvers which the power armor was holding. The guns were extremely large, with a barrel big enough to nearly fit a man's head inside. The damaged flight pack of the **SAMAS** had been removed, and in its place was an odd-looking mess of clunky jet **thrusters** and maneuvering jets.

"What are you waiting for?" the mechanic asked. "Suit up!"

Hartman eagerly pushed in his old code number on a carefully hidden datapad in the armor, and the suit practically swung open, the new flight pack and armor plating sliding down to reveal the inner pilot compartment. **Hartman** eagerly climbed in, to behold rows and rows of brand new electronic buttons and keypads. He was confused for a moment, but then managed to make sense of the odd new controls. The pilot began walking around unsteadily, still not entirely sure of how to turn on the internal gyroscope and the traction grips in his boots.

"You're going to love this," said the mechanic happily, as **Hartman** toddled around the garage. The alien being carefully set up a thick sheet of Mega-Damage ceramics in an empty corner, with a bull's-eye painted in the center. He then ran back behind the Super **SAMAS**.

"That target there is an official **Naruni Enterprises** power armor target," he said. "They don't come cheap ... it's about 900 creds each if you want one for yourself, but they're real durable. Most handheld weapons don't leave so much as a scratch." With that, he pulled out a small laser pistol and began to **fire** at the target. His beam left a slight discoloration, but little more. "Now you try," he said.

Hartman raised the revolvers to about shoulder height and was trying to aim when suddenly a small HUD screen lowered itself above his eyes. Twin dots showed where the two guns were aiming. When the heavy weapons finally settled on the target, the word, "LOCK," appeared on each side in small, LED letters. The pilot then pulled the triggers.

Even the super-strong robotic arms of the power armor were forced back by the powerful recoil, and huge amounts of noise and smoke filled the garage. It was like a lightning bolt had

gone off inside the building. When the smoke cleared, the target could be seen — shattered into tiny pieces.

"I love these!" cried **Hartman**. "How do they work?"

"Plasma cartridge technology," laughed the mechanic, lifting up a broken piece of the target. The chunk crumbled in his hands. "It's the same principle as an Earth revolver, with some minor ... updates. When you squeeze the trigger, mechanisms inside the gun spin the chamber, bringing a plasma **cartridge** into the barrel. Now, there's a little dynamo inside the gun too. The rotating of the chamber makes a spark of electricity, and that spark ignites the plasma cartridge. Once that cartridge is ignited, well, **KABOOM!**" The mechanic held up a thick black piece of plastic, about the size of a soda can, with warning labels in half a dozen languages written on the sides. "These are the cartridges, and lucky for you, you've got a year's supply. They're being stored in the garage space **Mr. Perrin** bought."

"**Perrin** rented a garage here?" asked **Hartman**, looking at the guns.

"Yeah. Just yesterday. Said he needed it for storage or something."

"**Hm,**" said **Hartman**, shrugging inside the power armor. "Wonder why. Hey, how do you reload these things?"

"You know how to reload a normal revolver?"

"Yeah."

"Same thing with these."

"Cool."

"Oh, I couldn't help but notice the **fragments** of the '**Rage Against the Machine**' CD you had in your audio compartment. I didn't know you had a fondness for Pre-Rifts Earth music."

"I can't get enough of it. Why? You've heard of '**Rage**'?"

"Of course. I collect Pre-Rifts artifacts. It's more for the money than because I like '**em**, but some of that old art and literature isn't bad."

"You got any music? I'm talking **1990s** rock here."

"Sure! I've got music from the 1980s all the way up to the big boom in 2098. But you only want the stuff from the 1990s?"

"Yeah. I didn't like the **techno-funk** they began listening to at the start of the millennium, I **didn't** like the weird opera-punk rock hybrid of the '**20s** and '**30s**, I hated the new age crap they were listening to in the '**40s** and '**50s**, loathed the reggae they listened to in the '**80s**, and don't even get me started on that disco revival they had right before the apocalypse. The only halfway decent music they had in that century was the jazz revival in the '**60s**, and practically none of it survived. Most of the modern music's either crappy or illegal."

The mechanic snatched up an ancient CD from one of his **worktables**. "I think this'd go well with your new look," he said, slipping it into a small carrying case built into the Super **SAMAS**. "**Powerman 5000**. Featuring Tokyo Vigilante #1. You like it, and we can arrange a purchase."

Hartman pulled down on a level labeled "Head Movement," and the robotic dog's head nodded.

"Well, you break that thing in," the mechanic said. "Oh, and you've got to fill out one of these forms every month and pass it in for something like the next year. There's a fax machine hidden under the plating in your left calf, with our number programmed into it. You can use that to send the data in to us, as

long as you're on the same planet as a **Naruni Enterprises** sales office. Happy driving, Mr. **Hartman.**"

* * *

"Who ARE these bozos, **anyway?!**" asked Sonja, one of many Juicer meres in the HFA, as she strolled down the main streets of Tolkeen with Jack **Perrin** at her side. "And why do you need ... **that ...** THING that you want to order from them?"

"Quiet, my dear," said Perrin concernedly, his eyes darting around from side to side, frantically searching for Inquisitors or soldiers. At the moment, he saw none within the earshot of a human. There were plenty of construction workers, though. The streets were full of Golems, Lesser Elementals, and Techno-Wizard construction workers, trying to rebuild the structures which had been damaged or destroyed in the recent bombing. The Elementals made Perrin squirm and twitch with nervousness and loathing, but they were not his present concern. The construction was really going quite well; only a few storefronts had not yet been fully repaired.

"Remember," he said quietly. "I am an experimental Ley Line Walker, and you are my beautiful, magically enhanced assistant. We are going to be performing a mystic experiment soon, and this purchase is a minor spell component. Don't say it's vital, or he'll jack up the price. And do NOT let it slip that we're not wizards. I somewhat doubt that this Necromancer fellow would be inclined to sell his hard-won wares to a Coalition flyboy and a Juicer mercenary."

The two walked into a quaint wooden building, which had probably survived the bombing by means of high-powered protection magic, with a hand-painted sign saying, "Bob's Antiquities." Inside was a dark, musty store full of mounted animal heads, bogus good luck charms, Pre-Rifts crap, and ancient magazines. A strange man stood behind a counter playing solitaire. He wore an old baseball cap and sunglasses, as well as a flannel shirt and faded jeans. A utility belt hung around his waist. "A graveyard," he said quietly, as his latest customers walked in.

"Where do Necromancers window-shop?" replied Perrin, walking over to the man. The storekeeper smiled, and then hit a hidden button under the counter, locking the store's door.

"Mister Jericho said I'd be **gettin'** a couple o' customers," he said. "What can this old Necromancer do you for? I've got a fresh shipment of dragon parts just itchin' to be sold."

"No, thank you. I need a specific component for a ritual I've got planned."

"And what would that be?"

"A Rhino-Buffalo's bladder. And it's got to be full of urine. A dry bladder isn't any good for me. It's gotta be full."

The Necromancer looked at **Perrin** strangely, then said, "Sorry, I don't have any in stock right now. I'll order **'em** from my hunters, but give it at least three or four days before delivery. Come back then, with your money."

Perrin nodded. "Sure thing," he said, as the storekeeper unlocked the front door. The pilot and the Juicer then began to walk out.

"Say," the Necromancer said. "You don't dress like any Ley Line Walker I ever saw."

"Uh," said Perrin, obviously surprised. "I think Ley Line Walker fashion's as ugly as hell."

"I hear you there," laughed the storekeeper, as Perrin and Sonja left.

"What do you need a Rhino-Buffalo's bladder for?" the Juicer asked, a few moments later.

"I don't want to talk about it here," Perrin said slyly. "I'll fill you in when we get back to the beer-hall. But I'll tell you this: It involves a bunch of mutant animals, a hovercycle, six modified mini-missiles, and an armored personnel carrier."

Chapter 29

"You're planning to... **WHAT?!**" asked Sonja angrily, slamming her fists down on the card table and nearly breaking the fragile wood.

"You heard me," said Perrin, more than a little amused at the Juicer's reaction. "I'm planning to spray one of Larsen's field bases with about 10 gallons of Rhino-Buffalo urine and then make off with one of his stolen Coalition APCs."

"Have you gone **insane?!**"

Perrin laughed as he opened up a can of beer. "No, wait!" he said. "Hear me out on this one. About maybe a three or four years ago, Larsen's Brigade was helping out a Simvan tribe in the Pecos Badlands. The Sims had been hitting our supply transports to Lone Star, and then hired Larsen when we hit back. Back then the CS didn't have all the cool tanks that it does today, so we had to improvise a bit. What we'd do is have some **flyboys** like me distract and mislead enemy formations while the artillery and mortar people a mile off got ready. We'd fly off once the heavy guns were ready to go, and the bad guys would go boom."

"Now, the high brass noticed that Larsen used almost all mutant animals to guard his camps. It made sense. He had plenty of mutants in his mercenary army, they were tough, and they had sharp senses. So we decided to use that against him. When his troops were out in the field one fine day, me and the other flyboys in my squad shot over their base at low altitude, dropping mini-missiles full of this **bad-smellin'** crap they cooked up at Lone Star to handle the animals. To humans, the stuff stank. But mutant animals have much sharper senses than ours. They'd literally be rolling around on the ground, trying to hold their noses shut, that's how bad it smelled to them. The meres in environmental body armor tried to shoot us down, but there weren't that many of them. And they didn't last too long when the artillery began popping its shells off."

"Now, Larsen came back a few hours later, after outmaneuvering and slaughtering our boys, to find that this time, we'd outmaneuvered him for a change! His main base and all the personnel in it were dead, all of the vehicles and robots he'd left there were either destroyed or gone, and his ammunition dump had been blown up. To his credit, Larsen kept on fighting for a while, but he evaced eventually, shooting through our lines and making his escape."

"Tolkeen hired Larsen a little while back, and it looks like he's learned from past mistakes. Instead of one big base, he's got something like three little ones. That's good, since I couldn't take on a big base by myself. And he's still using mutant animals for guard duty. So I'm going to do pretty much what I did

last time. Fly overhead at low altitude in a hovercycle, pop stink bombs all over the base, then ditch the hovercycle, jump into one of his APCs, and then drive it to a garage I rented in Tolkeen."

Sonja thought it over for a moment, looking quite concerned. "But what if something goes wrong?" she asked. "What if the guards defending Larsen's motor pool are wearing air filters or something? You could get blown away."

"Don't worry," Perrin said, trying to sound reassuring but coming off as patronizing. "I'll have a neural mace with me for close-range combat and some sonic grenades for anyone who's out of melee range."

"Why nothing lethal?"

"Well, I don't feel like making Larsen into even more of an enemy. If I go in there and massacre his guards, he'll hunt me and all of you down like animals. If I just temporarily incapacitate his dogs, then I think he'll be much less inclined to waste time and manpower gunning for me."

"All right, then," said Sonja, turning to leave. "I've got a mission to go on, so I'll be out of this dimension for a few days. In case I don't get back in time, good luck. You're prob'ly gonna need it if you decide to go with that plan."

Perrin smiled wistfully as she walked away. Just then, Nick Thompson walked in, with a disapproving expression on his bespectacled face. Perrin looked up at the former mage.

"I trust you heard it all?" the pilot asked.

Thompson nodded. "For someone with typically sharp Juicer senses, she's a pretty lousy judge of somebody's intentions. You don't give a damn about Larsen's opinion of you, do you? So tell me, why aren't you just going to nerve gas those mutant mercenaries?"

Perrin's facade of having it all together collapsed, and he sank down onto a chair like an old man who needs some support. There was a long silence. "I think I'm going soft from living here in Tolkeen," he finally said. "Out in the field, I never had any problems with the killing. Out in the field, I was fighting with enemy soldiers, Xiticix, Mechanoids, the real enemies of the human race, and I loved it. I thought I was doing the world a favor by killing evil D-Bees, and most of the time I probably was. And then my wife died, and I got real pissed at the monsters. I wanted them all to burn in Hell for killing her, even if I had to put them all there myself. I accepted the Coalition's little recon assignment and leadership of this **effin'** nuthouse because, you know, vengeance. I thought it was one step closer towards tossing the D-Bees into the boneyard. But I've been in Tolkeen too long with the little D-Bee children and the D-Bee women and the D-Bee civilians and all the other damn D-Bees who haven't done a damn thing! It's just... every time I see them, I see my wife and the kid that I never had, just with fur and fangs and stuff. I need to destroy this damn city, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to bring myself to when it hits the fan. The innocent people are the ones who screw with my head."

Thompson took a moment to digest it all. "Maybe not destroying the place is the right thing to do, Jack."

"But if I don't destroy Tolkeen and that damn pyramid nukes Chi-Town, even more innocents will have died. I've got thousands of D-Bee innocents on one hand, and thousands of humans on the other." He took out a cigarette and lit it up. "And here I am, stuck in the middle with you."

"Reminds me of an old movie I saw once," said Thompson, lighting a cigarette of his own.

* * *

Hubert Possman was laughing inwardly. He had endured horrible torture for days, for hours on end. His body had been scorched by the magical devices of torture. His arms had nearly been pulled from their sockets by constantly hanging from chains. His belly was cramped and aching from the slop they had force-fed him to keep him alive. But he hadn't given them anything. His will had remained firm. And today he would be free. Today his tormentor was going to use the magic wand that had the squid inside it.

The D-Bee mage in the black robes was carefully examining the wand, pressing buttons to push out and retract the squirming little squid-thing which oozed mucous and pus. The torturer smiled. "Don't look so chipper," he said, in his German-accented American. "This thing will hurt your soul. It isn't made by the **Splugorth**, but it looks to be almost as good."

Keep on smiling, you son of a bitch, thought Possman. *Soon you will be dead and I will be free*. "Just try it," Possman managed to cough out through his parched, scabrous mouth. "Just try it."

The D-Bee put the wand to his head, and the alien squid-thing emerged gleefully, with a loud squealing noise. Its tentacles wrapped around his lips and forced his mouth open, an invasive, hollow tongue from the center of the creature began to extend down his throat. The thing smelled of disease, and tasted of it, too. But Possman was thrilled to have it in his mouth. He had been waiting all day for this.

The CS Ranger bit down on the creature, with strength he didn't know his jaws possessed. The little monster began thrashing in his mouth as his teeth burst its organs and packets of fluid within it spilled open. The horrified torturer tried to pull the precious creature back, but it was stuck tight. Whitish, disgusting liquids and brackish blood exploded out of the thing's fragile little body. Once its flailing had stopped, Possman began to carefully chew the thing, probing it with his tongue. He looked up at the torturer with a wild gleam in his eyes.

The D-Bee mage looked very nauseated. It had killed dozens of men in its lifetime without feeling a twinge of regret. It had burned down helpless villages without feeling remorse later. But now it was looking at a man, obviously crazed, chewing on a dead hunk of skin with great relish, and the D-Bee very nearly vomited. It shook its head, amazed at Possman's brutality, and left the room to compose its thoughts.

Possman spit the loathsome piece of meat out of his mouth. He had gotten what he needed from it. A slim, needle-like bone, still damp with the creature's blood, lay in his cheeks. The Ranger carefully stuck the bone out from between his lips, and reached down with his hands as far as the manacles would allow. After what seemed an eternity, he grasped the piece of bone in the fingers of his right hand, and proceeded to pick the lock.

After Possman was free of the manacles, he began nosing through the instruments of torture. He finally settled on a promising-looking device consisting of a jar containing thousands of

writhing, faintly glowing maggots, and then sat down and waited for his torturer to return.

Chapter 30

Hubert **Possman** waited for his tormentor to return, a magical instrument of torture in his hands. The ranger was drooling ever so slightly, and breathing very hard. He was tired, and he was fairly sure that he was about to die, but he wanted to bring this bastard down with him. Death didn't seem quite so bad if he didn't have to face it alone.

The jar of squirming, magical maggots on a long, extendable handle squirmed in his hands, the vile insects making faint squealing and chirping sounds. "Ah, pipe down," Possman growled. "I don't like you bastards very much either."

After what seemed like hours but was probably just a few seconds, the door opened again, and the demonic mage stepped in. "You're really quite a handful, you pile of..." said the creature, in its soft, Euro-accented voice, before it saw Possman. Its eyes opened wide with terror when it saw what he had in his hands, and the ranger grinned inwardly. He had caught the thing unawares. He had made the bastard fear him.

"You don't know what that is in your hands," he said. "The Federation of Magic has been making weapons of war more fiendish than any I saw in my years serving the Angel of Death or Emperor **Zeerstrun**. That's one of them that you're holding right now. It's far too powerful to use on a minor demonic being like me."

"Contrary to popular opinion," said Possman, playfully thrusting the jar at the mage, "The meek shall not inherit the Earth. I honestly don't give a damn that you're a minor demonic being. You've been torturing me for a long time now, and by this point, I'd be quite willing to use devastating overkill on you."

"No, please!" shrieked the demon mage, as Possman shoved the jar in the creature's face. The thin, fragile glass keeping the maggots contained shattered violently, shards of rainbow and crystal spinning wildly away from their original form. With something that could only be called glee, the tiny, glowing insects swarmed over the shrieking face of the torturer. The first thing that they went for was the eyes. And once they were in there, they were inside the body, and could move about as they pleased, to eat the most delectable morsels first.

"Damn," murmured Possman, as he saw what used to be a humanoid creature turn into a mass of writhing larvae on the floor, as the mage was eaten from the inside out. "Forget the survival training, I am never eating bugs again, no matter how hungry I am." The ranger carefully pulled the demon mage's robe out of the maggots, shaking it to get all of the tiny creatures out, and then pulled the robe onto his own body, grimacing a little. He then walked out of the torture chamber, praying that his skills in remedial Dragonese and his acting ability would be good enough to get him out of this hell.

* * *

"This is insanity, **Shaad!**" cried one of the members of the High Council. "While you insist that every scrap of magical en-

ergy we have be stored in this pyramid, the Coalition troops are entrenching themselves around our borders! We are not giving our soldiers enough energy to push the Dead Boys out!"

The Ice Dragon sat on his enormous throne, smiling like a mischievous cat, listening to the cries of the other members of the Council. "It doesn't matter that our soldiers can't push the troops out. As long as the soldiers aren't coming in any deeper, we shall be fine. In just a short time, the jewel of the Coalition States will be a crater at least a mile deep. Let's see how much their entrenching helps those poor Dead Boys when they have no resupply shipments coming in, when their loved ones are all vapor."

"That may not help Tolkeen much," said one of the mages bitterly. "People are hungry already. In weeks, they may be fighting to the death over food. By the time that this weapon is ready to be used, by the time that we can use the energy of the Alien Intelligence we have trapped here, then few of our citizens may be left alive."

"Individuals matter little compared to the greater good," said Shaard, with more than a little bit of malice in his voice. "I have taken great care to build one of the greatest cities in the **Megaverse**. It is more than a city, actually, it is an ideal, a philosophy. I will not risk its safety, its existence, in a vain attempt to spare a few lives. If our citizens die, well, it is quite regrettable, but more citizens shall come to replace the dead. Even better, the city shall live on."

"We'll see how many citizens come to replace the dead when we make your musings public!" cried out a **Techno-Wizard**, producing a tiny audio CD recorder/player. "I've had enough soldiers die in this war because of your schemes. No more! Allot 25% of the excess energy you've stored in this place to our men in the field, and I won't release this CD to the public."

Shaad's visage hardened. "A word to the wise," said Shaard. "Do not even try to blackmail a dragon. It is perhaps the hardest and most dangerous thing to do."

"I've had enough of your empty threats, Shaard! Put up or shut up!"

Suddenly, the door to the central chamber opened, and a pale, bloodied man walked in, wearing the robes of a member of the mercenary company Shaard had hired. "**D'oh!**," he muttered in American, weakly smacking himself on the forehead.

"What is it now?" asked Shaard, sounding very, very annoyed.

"**Uh...** I... um... fell down the stairs and got myself banged up a bit," said the man. "And I... er... I broke a talisman that I needed for a ritual. Could you tell me where the... uh... **teleporters** are, so I can... er... go back to my apartment for another one?"

"Down the hall, take a right, and it should be the third door to your left," replied Shaard. The man nodded, and quickly left. "Now then, where was I?" asked the dragon. "Oh, yes. So it's action that you want, eh?" he asked the **Techno-Wizard**. "I've got a friend here who knows all about action."

Suddenly, a humanoid creature dressed in gleaming black armor and a blood red cape stepped out of seemingly nowhere, to stand right next to the Techno-Wizard. Clutched in its gauntlet was a string of pearls, their whiteness contrasting sharply with the ebony carapace of the creature. "I believe that your wife was

missing these?" it said, in a voice like glass being crushed. "I saw her looking for them. What a lovely woman. It would be such a pity if something were to happen to her. Oh, such a pity. And there are so many things that can happen, so many accidents that can occur."

"Bastard!" cried the mage, lashing out with a punch directed at the newcomer. But by the time that the fist was whistling through the air where the creature had been, the creature was on the other side of the **Techno-Wizard**.

"Yes, it would be a great pity indeed," said the creature, and then it stepped back and was suddenly gone.

"May I advise you to play ball," said the dragon confidently. "You really don't have a choice. The recorder, please?"

The **Techno-Wizard**, looking like he was about to cry, took the CD out of the recorder, and snapped it into four pieces.

* * *

"How the hell do I work this thing?" muttered Possman, glaring down at the series of wires, controls, and buttons that made up the **teleporter's** control pad. He didn't know how to work magical equipment. And he didn't have much time. In a matter of minutes, the demon mage might be reported missing, he might be found out, he might pass out.

"Don't go into shock, don't go into shock," he muttered to himself, as he began pressing buttons. After he managed to get what looked like a promising set of coordinates into the panel's LCD display, he hit the ENTER button, and a pillar of blue light appeared on the central pad in the room. Possman nervously stepped into the light.

There was an electric-sounding buzz, and Possman suddenly found himself standing ten feet in the air in a dark, smelly alleyway. The ranger fell on top of a pile of garbage just as he realized that he had probably put the wrong coordinates in. He then passed out, a cold, nearly lifeless derelict, hopelessly lost in a city he hated, dressed in the robes of a demon lord.

Chapter 31

"This is great," said Perrin to himself as he cruised through the tree line of the wilderness around Tolkeen, small branches and leaves flying out behind him as his stolen Turbo hovercycle ripped through the forest. Once again, he felt the wind in his air and the heady thrill of speed, and once again he wondered how he could have done without them for so long.

It's a good bike, thought Perrin, as he easily dodged a huge tree branch. *What a pity that I'll have to leave it behind. Oh, well. My men can steal me another one.* "My men?" he suddenly whispered to himself, clouds of doubt and confusion clouding his helmeted brow. "Why did I think that?" Perrin began wondering about his connection with the Human Freedom Association. Did he really associate himself with a band of rabble like that? Or was the HFA really a decent fighting **force**, and not the petty crooks they appeared to be? Perrin could not decide, and that troubled him greatly.

Some of their hackers were damn good, that much was definitely true. Perrin lovingly patted the small black box connected to the **hovercycle's** controls by duct tape and wiring. That box,

installed by an HFA computer geek, had managed to cloak Perrin from **Tolkeen's** technological radar net as Perrin had flown through the one blind spot in Grand Alamar's walls, where none of the garrison troops could see from their positions. The ace was still worried that he may have been picked up on magical sensors, but had seen no enemy opposition yet.

The forests gradually began to thin out, as Perrin came closer to the battlefields. In this part of the wilderness, Golems patrolled constantly, magical radar and shielding bases dotted the woods, and the sounds of battle could be heard echoing from far off in the distance. Some trees were down, indicating spaces where errant CS missiles had hit. Most of the lasers used by the Coalition could travel further than a mile away, and these woods were only a few miles away from the Coalition's bases. There was precious little buffer zone of battlefield in this war. But it didn't make much difference, since neither side was getting much of anywhere.

Suddenly, Perrin saw the base of his enemy. A fence of barbed wire had been stretched around an area of about 50 yards square, and a few shacks with "Caution: EXTREME DANGER" signs on them by the sides of the fence alerted Perrin that the wire was probably conducting huge amounts of electricity. There were about half a dozen pillboxes in the ground, all of them surrounded by deep trenches. There were a few deactivated robot vehicles outside, slumped over like dead metal giants, and half a dozen Mark V APCs, repainted in camouflage colors. Perrin couldn't see any anti-aircraft batteries, but there were a couple of huge plasma cannons at the gate, doubtless to discourage base-crashing 'bots. It made pretty good sense to Perrin that this mini-base wouldn't have high security. This place was just a **medivac** base, where the wounded were brought to be patched up. Larsen hadn't been expecting an attack here, behind his lines, at a non-combat base, and now he would pay for his **overconfidence**.

"I see him, sir," said the mutant ape under his camouflage **tarp**, his **thick**, muscular hands wrapped around the fire controls of an anti-aircraft mini-missile battery. "Should I blow that arrogant sky jockey's butt **outa'** the air, or what?" The ape adjusted his headset a little bit, rolled around the toothpick on his tongue, and fidgeted in his seat a little bit. In his humble opinion, Base Commander **Carlsen** always took too **friggin'** long to make up his mind.

"No," said the gentle, milky voice of Carlsen a few moments later. "All anti-aircraft batteries, hold your fire. Repeat, hold your fire. I want to see what this intruder is up to. If he tries to escape or attack, then you may return fire. Until then, let's see what his game is."

The ape growled in frustration and anger, along with his three counterparts at the other three anti-aircraft batteries at the other three corners of the base. Too many people had died due to delays like this for the ape to respect this command. He would obey it, but he would not like it. For the moment, all that the mutant could do was hope that nobody he liked got killed in the attack which he was sure would come, and pray that Larsen removed Carlsen from duty soon. Carlsen was too conservative.

Perrin leaned back for a moment, and patted the mini-missile pod, full of his hard work. Seeing what these babies could do would make up for the hours he had spent carefully removing every drop of foul goo from the thick, oily, Rhino-Buffalo **blad-**

der. As long as it vaporized, that was the key. If the urine simply came out as a liquid, it was no good. It had to vaporize. **Perrin** took a moment to pick his target, finally settling on a frail-looking fellow in Plastic-Man armor (minus the helmet, thank heavens), who seemed to be looking up at Perrin with a pair of macrobinoculars. The ace then pushed the fire button, and half a dozen mini-missiles full of Rhino-Buffalo urine went speeding out.

Carlsen saw the burst of smoke and flame as the mini-missiles shot out from the pod, and realized that he should have acted earlier. This was an attack after **all!** As he raised the **walkie-talkie** to his lips to give the order to fire at will, Carlsen's eyes followed the trail of the fluttering, smoking missiles, expecting them to fly at one of the deactivated, helpless combat robots. He was very much surprised when they started coming in his direction. The Base Commander dropped his walkie-talkie, yelped in horror, and then began scrambling off towards cover. But the mini-missiles were much faster than he was, and good cover was nowhere near.

The missiles slammed into Carlsen's chest, and knocked him backwards about ten feet as they burst apart. For a moment, Carlsen thought that the missiles had been duds, and that he was safe. Then he noticed the thick mist of yellow-green vapor that had exploded out from the missiles, and then he smelt the air, and the only thing he could do then was scream.

The ape winced, as a steady stream of profanity shot out from his headphones. The mutant threw the things off of his head, disgusted by the screams of pain(?) and anger that his comrades were crying out. It sounded like they had been terribly wounded, maybe even crippled by the missiles that the jet jockey had fired. The ape growled, and took careful aim, knowing that he had to send his enemy to hell with one shot, or else he himself would be the next target. However, before he could pull the trigger, a mini-missile fired out to hit something or someone just behind the simian's position, and suddenly the mutant was enveloped in a cloud of yellow-green mist. He took one whiff, and his nostrils began to burn as a scent like ammonia and rotten milk gently and thoroughly caressed the insides of his sinuses. The ape joined his fellow mercenaries in the screaming of curses, as he rolled on the ground, holding his nose in pain.

Perrin watched the clouds of thick, vile gas flow over the enemy camp. He saw the mutant mercenaries screaming with rage as the scent incapacitated them. *They should be thanking me*, Perrin thought, as he slipped his gas mask over his face. *I'm sparing their lives*. Perrin eased the hoverbike forward, gliding through the clouds of urine vapor.

Suddenly, he felt his hoverbike rock from underneath, like it had hit something big. Perrin felt the bike heave and pitch under him, and he saw a fire begin to envelop the bottom **thrusters**. Then the Turbo began to move even more wildly, like the robotic bulls which they had in some of the rec centers at Lone Star. Perrin was tossed off effortlessly by the convulsing metal bird, as flames enveloped its belly.

He grunted as the corrugated tin roof of one of the garages came up to meet him. As he rose to his feet, Perrin reflected that he got tossed off of hoverbikes a little bit too often. It was good that he was trained in absorbing impact and loosening his body when he hit the ground. Then Perrin looked over and saw his fallen bike caught in the barbed wire fence, sparking like a fire-

cracker as electricity surged through it. "Good thing I wasn't wearing my seat belt," he reflected, as the Turbo exploded.

It was then that Perrin realized he was in trouble. The APCs were on the other side of the camp, the gas was beginning to clear, and there were dozens of angry mutant animals, armed to the teeth, on the ground beneath him. The pilot reached into his knapsack, and pulled out the light autocannon he had brought along. He then reached down onto his utility belt, selected the clip labeled with an **"R"**, and jammed it into his rifle. That task done, he began leaping from roof to roof, slowly getting towards his target.

"Freeze!" cried a headhunter in heavy, environmentally sealed body armor, crawling up onto the roof behind Perrin. The **merc** grabbed the pilot in a choke hold, and began trying to slip a **Vibro-Blade** through the protective mesh covering **Perrin's** throat. The pilot merely smiled, flipped the headhunter onto his back, and then fired a quick burst into his face as the man tried to stand. The soldier of fortune yelped, and was thrown backwards, off of the roof.

"If those weren't rubber bullets, you'd be dead, buddy!" yelled Perrin to the dazed mercenary.

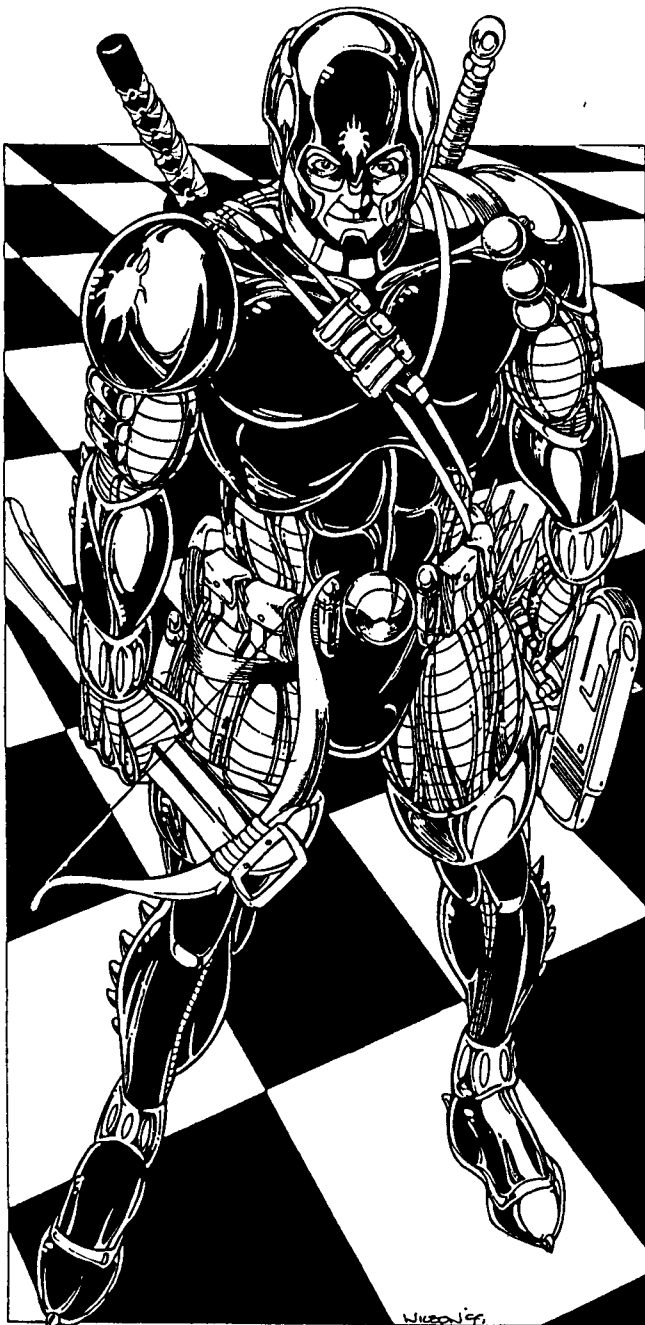
A couple of humans wearing gas masks but no body armor ran out of a building carrying particle beam rifles. Perrin brushed them away with another burst, leaving the two lying on the ground, holding their chests in pain. The prize was almost within reach...

A combat 'Borg climbed up in front of Perrin, grinning malevolently. It had opted to retain its original face during the surgery, but the cyborg body which it had chosen was not really suited to it. The end result was a face that looked square and flat, a surprisingly eerie appearance. "I'm going to break you in half, gringo," the **'Borg** laughed, in a Mexican accent. "Nobody sprays crap on my **amigos!**" With that exclamation, a pair of Vibro-Swords snapped out of its palms.

"It isn't crap, you ignorant moron!" said Perrin as he blocked one of the blades with his armored forearm, while simultaneously ejecting the spent clip from his autocannon. As he ducked the second attack, Perrin inserted a clip labeled **"H."** "It's piss! I put piss all over your **amigos!**" the pilot yelled, aggravating his enemy even further.

Just as the **'Borg** was about to swing its blades in a lethal strike, Perrin pulled the trigger, and a high explosive round crashed into the machine man's chest. The mercenary was thrown backwards off of the roof, spraying coolant fluids and fragments of armor. **"Pendeho,"** it snarled as it hit the ground.

Perrin sprayed a quick burst of HE rounds into the door of the APC, shattering the entrance. He then **gracefully** leapt from the roof and darted inside the metal behemoth. The pilot leapt into the driver's seat, pushed the ignition button, and then slammed down onto the accelerator and roared off in a screech of glory. He easily slammed through the electrified gates, and off into the wilderness beyond, leaving a urine-soaked camp of humiliated mercenaries behind him.



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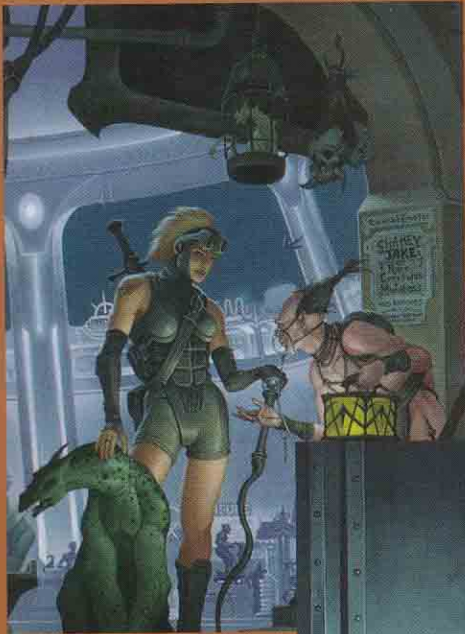
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