

WORD ON THE STREET

By Michael Chumbler

At first glance, the dimly lit nondescript tavern seemed so perfect for a clandestine meeting that it might as well been a cliché out of a bad tri-dee stage setting. Moving inside the tavern, the nervous young man put on a brave face and let his eyes adapt to the smoky darkness. He could see a handful of customers, all sitting in pairs, scattered among the poorly lit booths. One barely visible figure sat alone and had no trouble making a friendly gesture toward the newcomer.

“Welcome young’un, glad ya made it fit as a fiddle. Some folk say they are interested in, shall we say, alternative money makin’ opportunities, but when they find where they gots to go to get started in the ‘business’ as it were ... well let’s say I get stood up more than I don’t. Not that I take it personal, my line of expertise ain’t for the weak-kneed. Now I know what your first question already is, so excuse me if’n I just cut ya off a’for ya ask.

“I’m known around these parts as Frankie ‘Twice Pipe’ Whitaker. Now why do they call ya Twice Pipe? I could spin ya a hell of a yarn if’n I wanted, but the gospel accordin’ to me is, when I was makin’ my bones on the street, I used to carry a sawed off double barreled shotgun with the stock cut down to the pistol grip. Only had to use it once and that was on a *hun dan*¹ what had it comin’. Made a hell of a mess outta that loser, but sure pumped up my rep. After that one bad deal, not too many folk thought it was worth getting’ splatted by that there twice pipe shotgun, so the wags I used to run with hung me with that moniker and I’ve worn it ever since.

Blackout Zones

“Now I know ya’ll didn’t contact me to talk about back in the day, so I’ll give ya the quick skinny on makin’ coin without the overhead of bein’ a legitimate businessman. First thing to ken is that regardless of what rock ya calls home what is part of the ‘Verse, if’n ya know how to look, ya can find a means to make coin off the books. The look on your mug tells me ya thinks *not on the Core Worlds ya can’t*, but truth is, what most of those uppity folk what live on those fancy beacons of our fine Alliance won’t

fess to kenning even if’n they do ken it, is that them shiny Central Planets gots places them as what are in the know calls “Blackout Zones”.

“Now the reason they calls it a Blackout Zone is that in the ‘Zones you can get away from those infernal monitors what poke at ya from every side on a Core World. Them as what lives in the ‘Zones have jimmed the monitors so many times that the Feds have given up tryin’ to get a straight feed from ‘em. So the Feds figured they’d let rats in the ‘Zones have their little victory in exchange for at least bein’ able to pretend at knowin’ where the rats are and settlin’ for makin’ life difficult for any otherwise upstandin’ citizen what tries to pay the rats a visit.

“Its bad news for a citizen to visit a ‘Zone cause the Feds reckon, and with good reason, anyone talkin’ to anyone in a ‘Zone is up to no good thing. Cause while the monitors in the ‘Zones don’t work worth a tinker’s damn, the ones on the outside work just fine and the Feds always keeps a beady little eye on the ‘Zones. Ya gets snatched up by the Feds in a Blackout Zone, ya better have friends and be prepared to fork over five thousand in credits to cover the fine for bein’ dense enough to get pinched.

“The main reason the Feds drop such a heavy load is, regardless of which one of those oh so lovely areas ya visit ya can finds purdy much anythin’ what makes ya happy. Drugs is the most common thing folk with too much coin and not enough sense likes to score in the ‘Zones, but if ya got the cashy money, ya can pay to play with no shortage of unseemly entertainments and I’ll let your own mind fill in the blanks of what I mean, but I can bet, unless ya gots a leaky brainpan, I doubt if ya can really imagine just how unseemly some folk like their entertainments.

Getting Started in the Business

“Now as for what ya called about, which I wouldn’t be much of an information broker if I didn’t know, is how to get into the business of less than legal coin. Since you’re still about as green as they get, I’ll start with the Blackout Zones that ya didn’t even know about. Anyway, as I said the ‘Zones exist only on the Central Planets. Gettin’ in without those external monitors resultin’ in your gettin’ pinched, ya only gots two choices. One, ya got to have a connection on the inside of the ‘Zone or two, ya got to figure out how to slip past them infernal monitors.

1 Jerk

“Havin’ someone on the inside is the best way, but if’n you’re as new to the street as ya are, kid, that is gonna be a problem. Either ya gets someone that knows to make an intro, or ya slips in. Once ya’ve met a real rat though, things get a lot easier cause all ya gots to do is send them a short wave and they’ll reply with some sort of prearranged place and time to meet. They’ll take care of spoofin’ the closest monitor or have a skill stage a distraction that will allow ya to slip in. This of course only works once ya know a rat cause they only deal with folk via Cortex after they have met ya face to face.

“Since I don’t know ya kid, I can’t vouch for ya, so that leaves slippin’ in, so I’ll give ya the skinny on how to make that happen. Since sure as the sun rises in the East, ya can bet, that on any given night, ya ain’t gonna be the only one tryin’ to get into a ‘Zone. Trick is to spot the moneyed individuals and piggy back off of them. Rich folk lookin’ to score drops or some other kinda drugs is plumb easy to spot, fancy threads and shiny over chromed hover cars make ‘em look like beacons in the dark. Thing is, since they do stand out so plain, Feds swarm outta their hidey holes to snatch up them as what obviously don’t belong, that my young friend is your cue to move. When the Feds pounce, ya beats feet into the ‘Zone and as long as ya move fast and ya don’t trip or do somethin’ a stupid as a bag of hammers, it’ll be too easy to slip inside.

“Now, once ya are inside, don’t go acting like ya belong there. The rats know everyone what lives in their ‘Zone and they are a close knit bunch. Since each one knows everyone else, ya can’t claim to be with someone else or have an invite as they will suss out right quick if ya is or is not lyin’ out your *pi gu*². And merciful Buddha kid, be prepared to face down the scariest moment of your young life the first time once ya do meets with someone as they will take your measure and if ya looks weak, ya might just find yourself as the newest sack of merchandise in some slaver’s cargo hold. Be tough and don’t take no gumption, but for pity’s sake keep it to fists. Gorram gunplay is bad business and ya’ll end up losin’ that stand off.

Next Steps

“Okay, now ya are on the inside and ya’ve made contact, ya best have an idea of what ya want at that point ‘cause these are hard folk that don’t suffer fools and ain’t got much time for jawin’ and such. Speak your words well and I guaranty ya, someone will have a

way to get ya what ya is lookin’ for. There are all manners of money makin’ opportunities to be had in a ‘Zone. Some of the more popular ones are smugglin’ goods, most just to avoid them endless taxes and tariffs what the Alliance likes to make off of goods what ain’t theirs, but some more lucrative goods that the Feds don’t cotton to no way, like drugs, guns, and if ya is cussed enough to stomach the gig, human trafficking. And when I said popular, I mean those last two commodities are the most commonly smuggled goods in the ‘Verse. However, if smugglin’ ain’t your thing, gambling, prostitution, protection rackets, and good old thievin’ opportunities are to be had.

Sealing the Deal

“What you can get into is mainly what ya got the *gao wan*³ for and who ya can gets to take a chance on a new operator such as yourself. Typically, the one havin’ the job is a go between, they lets ya in on an opportunity, such as a under protected payroll, for a cut of the take. How big their cut will be will be based on how well they trust ya. That part don’t bode well for ya kid as a complete unknown can, at best, hope for is a fifty-fifty split. Ya get a rep for gettin’ the job done and ya can easily get sixty-forty, or after ya has made your bones, ya can count on as high as eighty percent with your contact bein’ in touch with someone what can fence what ya got.

“Well, I reckon that should do ya for now kid. I can see ya was countin’ on more, but I do make my livin’ by obtainin’ information and gettin’ it to them as what needs it. I know ya paid a nice little consideration for what I done gave ya already, but as they say, anythin’ worth doin’ is worth doin’ for money and while my information ain’t exactly what ya calls a tangible asset, it ain’t exactly free neither, so ya make it back from the ‘Zones and prove ya can make it in the business, then maybe we’ll move on to some of the other elements like the Tongs what make up who will be your competition in this here ‘Verse of ours, should ya find that ya got what it takes to make it in this thing we do, what them as don’t, call the criminal world.

Frankie watched his young client exit the tavern and the older man nodded in approval at how the younger man carried himself as he departed. “Good luck, kid,” He murmured, signaling the bartender for another drink as he lit his pipe, leaned back, and waited for his next appointment.

2 Bottom

3 Testicles

**FRANKIE 'TWICE
PIPE' WHITAKER**

Agi d6, **Str** d6, **Vit** d6, **Ale** d12, **Int** d10,
Wil d8; **LP** 14, **Init** d6 + d12

Traits Dull Sense: Vision (Minor Complication), Friends in Low Places (Minor Asset), Good Name (Minor Asset), Hooked: Tobacco (Minor Complication), Nose for Trouble (Minor Asset), Prejudice: Wealthy (Minor Complication), Scrawny (Minor Complication), Talented: Investigation (Minor Asset)

Skills Athletics d6, Guns d6/Shotgun d8, Covert d6/Hide d8, Influence d6/Persuasion d10/Streetwise d12, Knowledge d6/Business d8, Perception d6/Deduction d8/Hearing d8/Intuition d10/Investigation d12, Unarmed Combat d4

Description Frankie is a thin, older, bespectacled man, but his exact age is difficult to discern; those that meet him are unable to agree beyond something between forty and sixty. For those that move in his circle, his knowledge of and ability to provide timely information on the inner workings of the 'Verse's underworld for a 'consideration' are legendary. Frankie is not known to have any affiliation with any specific criminal elements operating below the surface of the Alliance's thin veneer of civility. His only known dislike is the disdain with which he holds the wealthy, regardless of what part of the Alliance they're from, but only Frankie knows the reason why he feels this way.

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