

SHADOWRUN

STREET LEGENDS

CASTING A LONG SHADOW

At the end of a run, you've either got a good story to tell or you're dead. Live long enough, and you'll get enough stories to fill a book, and some of them will be killer. There is a certain class of people out on the streets that runners love to talk about, the people at the center of the stories swapped late at night over a round of wiper-fluid hooch. Some of them are good, some of them are lucky, and some of them are among the most powerful creatures of the Sixth World. All of them, in their own way, are legends.

Street Legends profiles more than thirty renowned figures in the Sixth World, including JackPoint stalwarts such as Haze, Rigger X, and Puck; classic runners like Serrin Shamander and Tommy Talon; and powerful behind-the-scenes figures including Lugh Surehand, Nadja Daviar, and the great dragon Lofwyr. Learn about hunting vampires with Martin de Vries, running guns in a war zone with Marcos, and trying to put a face to the elusive Hans Brackhaus.

Street Legends contains short fiction bringing these characters to life, as well as text describing each person and what makes them a legend. Also, each and every person profiled has complete game stats. *Even the dragons.*

Street Legends is for use with *Shadowrun, Twentieth Anniversary Edition*.



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STREET LEGENDS

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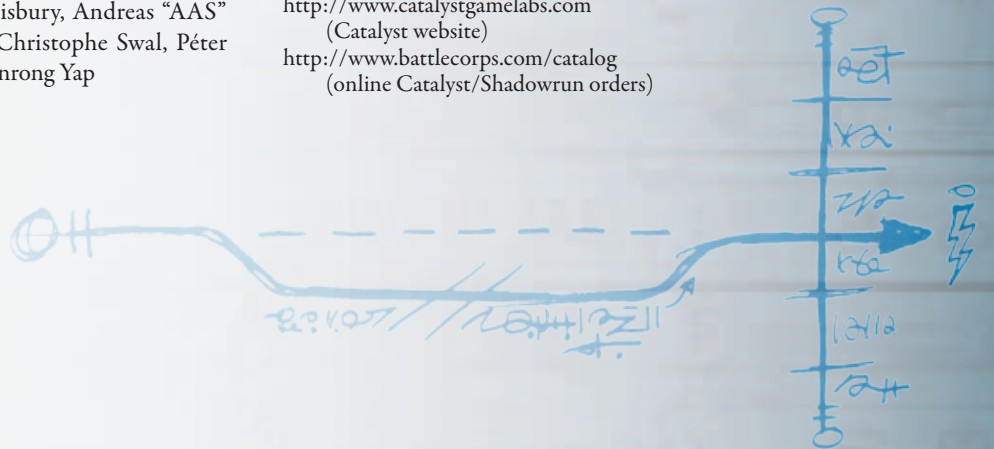
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INTRODUCTION

POSTED BY: FASTJACK



I've had a few different conversations with myself where I explained the reasons for assembling this collection. First explanation: We've all been there, in that place where we hate everybody. Where we think that people who don't need people are the luckiest goddamned people in the whole goddamned world. Where we see just how much pain, misery, and overall nonsense is inflicted by people being people. In a world like that, you'd better know who's out there, who's powerful, and what they're doing, because they're the people who are going to screw you. You may want to keep away from them, you may want to take them on to get them out of your way, but either way you better know what they're capable of.

On better days, though, I'm more accepting of people who aren't me. I can see uses for them. I've got my own talents, sure, but there are plenty of other people who can add what they've got to what I'm doing. Or failing that, they can pay me to do the things that aren't right for their talents, or that they don't have the time to do themselves. If I'm going to work with these people, it helps to know what their talents are, what their style is, and how I can fit in with their *modus operandi*. It's just good business to check out what they're doing.

But let's leave both of those arguments aside for a minute and stop thinking about business. Let's not deal with people in terms of who can help us or who can hurt us—instead, let's think of people who are just plain interesting. I've met a lot of people in my time, and some of them are boring enough to make you beg for them to turn on the All Paint Drying channel so you can watch that instead of dealing with them. But then there are the people who are so terrifically interesting that whenever a group of their peers gets together to chat about work and the things they've been up to, their names come up, and everybody's got something to say. There are so many good stories about these people—along with questions about mysterious things in their past and present—that you can't help talking about them.

I like good bar talk as much as the next guy, so in that spirit I put together the following compilation, with contributions from a lot of friends, both old and new. This isn't an exhaustive collection of the most interesting people in the Sixth World, or a listing of the people who are at the top of their respective fields. This is a collection of individuals who, for better or for worse, get people talking. Some of them have broad ambitions and will inevitably seek to have an impact on a worldwide stage (or are already at that level); others are content to slink into the background and do their thing. In this collection, we have a famous author with a secret life, a legend who fell into some dark days but seems to have found a way back to the light, a trick-shot artist, a motorcycle-riding daredevil, and several people with secrets that they'd like to keep covered up. They might not be happy about having their dirty laundry aired here, but I suggest they get over it. After all, who doesn't like to be the centerpiece in a story that people are so interested in that they can't help but pass it on?

Take a look at this info, and use the information it contains to make some contacts, get an edge on the competition, or just listen to a hell of a story. I figure all of those are worthy purposes.



RUNNING LEGENDS

In this book, the statistics given for the characters generally reflect their legendary status. There are, however, some characters that are legendary not because they are overwhelmingly powerful, but because their nerve, guts, luck, or other intangible qualities help them to stand out more than their attributes would alone. To reflect this, gamemasters may wish to apply some of the “Cinematic Gameplay” rules (see p. 75, *SR4A*) to all characters when using these characters in a game.

If gamemasters wish to apply these rules in a more systematic fashion, characters who have achieved 500 Karma can spend 100 Karma to obtain Legendary status, which means they roll successes on 4s, 5s, and 6s.

A NOTE ON SPELLS

Each magic-using character has a particular list of spells listed for them, but gamemasters need not feel bound by this. They can swap out spells for these individuals as situations and preferences warrant.

```

Connecting Jackpoint VPN ...
... Matrix Access ID Spoofed.
... Encryption Keys Generated.
... Connected to Onion Routers.
> Login
*****
> Enter Passcode
*****
... Biometric Scan Confirmed.
Connected to <ERROR: NODE UNKNOWN>
"Every legend contains its residuum of truth."

```

JackPoint Stats

81 users currently active in the network

Latest News

* <081473> If you hear anything definitive about Puck, I'd really like you to pass it on to me. --FastJack

Personal Alerts

- * You have 4 new [private messages](#).
- * You have 2 [messages](#) queued for anonymous re-routing.
- * You have received no new [Metalink Friends](#) add requests.
- * You have 18 new [responses](#) to your JackPoint posts.
- * PDA: Drinks with mates at ten. Or alone if mates don't show.
- * PDA: Find a basement to crash in until this heat wave lets up.

First Degree

You are hidden from all contacts.

Your Current Rep Score: 67

(87% positive)

Current Time: 14 Aug 2073, 01:12

- PREFERENCES
- FEEDS
- TASKS
- LINKS
- HISTORY

Welcome back to JackPoint, chummer; your last connection was severed: 18 hours, 55 minutes, 26 seconds ago



Today's Heads Up

- * Be smooth and be subtle if you want to be safe. [Tag: [Spy Games](#)]
- * You can't own all the toys in the world, but you can enjoy thinking about and looking at 'em. [Tag: [Runner's Black Book](#)]

Incoming

- * All that chasing after artifacts is going to add up to something, and that "something" may go boom. [Tag: [Artifacts Unbound](#)]
- * Most of them are insane, but even if one's true it's bad news for all of us. [Tag: [Conspiracy Theories](#)]
- * The ocean: It's like a big, wide, traffic-free getaway lane. Use it. [Tag: [Deadly Waves](#)]

Top News Items

- * Lofwyr refuses all press interviews, does not comment on happenings at Mount Shasta. [Link](#)
- * Seattle ADA Dana Oaks accused of targeting orks and trolls in law enforcement efforts. [Link](#)
- * Denver Treaty negotiations take a violent turn in fight over borders. [Link](#)

- CHAT
- MESSAGES
- FILES
- POSTS
- NEXUS
- SEARCH

Active

ComStar Firewall

Active

Jack in the Box Antivirus

Active

SpamWitch Filter

On/Receiving

Commcode

Excellent

Signal

Active

Hidden Mode

Local Map

STREET LEGENDS

Invited Guests

Jonathan Blake	Lothan	Aracos
Wyrn Watcher	Quillon	Boom
Jane in the Box	Neurosis	[More]

Posts/Files tagged with "Street Legends":

* "Agent"	* Akuchi	* Cayman
* Elijah	[More]	

CONTINUE

ADVANCED SEARCH

SAVE



SECONDARY

BY MALIK TOMS

They made the deal over coffee in the atrium of a bombed-out hotel in Zona Norte, Bogotá. Marcos settled too quickly, anxious to avoid another encounter with a shade, and now he was sweating in a dumpster in El Bosque Izquierdo with no reliable intel and all the wrong people he could find on such short notice.

Nothing about the job was choice. He only had five runners, including himself. The grenades came from Juanmi, which meant the Azzies already knew he was up to something, because Juanmi would sell out his own mother. Still, work was work. The truth was he didn't like shadowruns, especially not the shit Picador dragged him into. She wasn't even here to get her hands dirty. She was a thousand meters away, camped atop the highest building that had a line of the sight to the target. Ever since Red Anya provided her with that Barret, Picador had made a living of staying as far way from her target as possible.

"Saren, give me an update on the astral."

"One minute," The mage called back over the secure commlink channel. Saren was an asshole, but that didn't bother Marcos. Anyone who got into the business of war for profit was bound to have something wrong in their head. Assholes were the least of his worries. No, he didn't like Saren

because of the way the skinny elf flung his mana around. There was nothing delicate about it. All large-scale boom boom, like a mystical demolitions expert stomping around in a nursery. But Marcos needed a mage, and their kind didn't exactly sprout from the vine.

This was ghost work. Get in, locate the red suitcase, blow it to hell, get gone. Marcos tried to avoid speculating on what it was that was being destroyed, considering he was pulling down a 25k fee, plus 2k for gear. The block belonged to the Olaya cartel, so of course Fitz thought it was tempo. Saren and Javy agreed. Picador hadn't chimed in. It was her fixer, so she would know if they were walking into the middle of a drug war. Marcos had the distinct feeling he could have gotten more for the job if he'd just stayed longer to negotiate. Despite the heat, he shivered at the thought of spending too much time in Zona Norté. No, 25k was a fair price for the quick turnaround.

"Javy, report?" The teenage gunman was responsible for rear sightlines in and out of the building. The location for the meet had been a machine shop before the city turned into a battleground. Lots of open floor space. Good interior sight lines. The second-floor catwalk looked out on windows facing



the north street as well as the floor below. The Johnson's intel was old, derived from outdated city records. Marcos didn't know what structural changes had taken place inside the building over the last ten years.

Javy said, "Still all clear here."

"Fitz, give me eyes." The Irish merc was wired up with a visual link that allowed another runner to access what he saw. Presently that point of view focused on a pair of cartel gangers slouching by the front door. Fitz's gift for blending in allowed him to focus on the entrance while staying just under a block away. The two guards bore no resemblance to the guy who stepped out for a smoke earlier. That meant there were six more guns in the building, plus whoever the cartel had in charge here.

Picador said, "Looks like it's show time. Fitz, you should see a limo roll by you in just a second."

Marcos was getting anxious. He'd sat in the dumpster all morning. It was the closest spot to the ingress he could find that wasn't being monitored. He had lasered pinholes into the container, giving him sight of both ends of the alley and the side door they planned on using to breach the building. No one had checked the alley since the cartel soldiers had first arrived in the early afternoon. One soldier came outside once for a smoke, glanced around the alley, and went back inside. This far removed from Jaime Salazar, the Olaya men had grown lazy, feeling protected by their reputation. That would be a costly mistake.

The plan was simple. Marcos would breach the side door, with Saren moving in to provide support. As soon as they had fixed their eyes on the package, Saren would unload a manablast into the room, and Marcos would follow with a pair of high-ex grenades. The ensuing blaze was sure to wipe out the bag. He didn't much care about any collateral damage that might result.

Fitz responded, "I got it. We have three bodyguards exiting, and, well, look who's here."

Marcos brought up Fitz's POV on his PAN. The last person to exit the limo was a woman he recognized from the trideo. Debra "Firestorm" Herrera, founder of One Bogotá. There had been chatter that she was little more than a gang leader putting together a power block big enough to get in bed with a major cartel.

Marcos said, "I guess the rumors are true, but I don't see the suitcase." Herrera and her muscle went inside the building. None of them were carrying the package Marcos' team was here to destroy.

Picador said, "More players. You've got three Rover SUVs approaching."

The cars halted in front of the machine shop, unloading two men from each vehicle. The central vehicle grabbed his attention.

"Can anyone ID the player?" Marcos asked,

"I can," Fitz said. "Pablo Landeros. He's an assistant—the assistant—to Archbishop Diego Rodriguez."

“What the fuck is he doing meeting with Herrera? The church has an active bounty on her head.” Landeros came heavy, like he was expecting a fight. He had four shooters with him, all MET2000 by the markings on their urban camo gear, and a fourth man, bald and armored, who carried no obvious firepower and no red suitcase.

“Saren?”

“Already on it.” The mage sent out a watcher to take a closer look. In another sprawl, that move would be like shooting a flare into the darkness, but this was Bogotá. A single watcher spirit was not likely to be noticed.

Saren chimed in a moment later. “Our bald friend is indeed a mage, and probably initiated based on the number of active foci he’s slinging around. I would guess Brotherhood of the Iron Crescent. His abilities are way beyond anything I can do.”

Fitz said, “It looks like we stumbled onto a summit.”

Intelligence information is rarely the same as the facts on the ground, but this was becoming ridiculous. Marcos was beginning to regret not asking for more money.

Javy sounded nervous when he spoke. “We cannot do this job. We should not do this job. Herrera and the church coming together could be good for my people. We can’t fuck this up by taking her out.”

Marcos was afraid this might happen. “We’re committed, Javy,” he said. “It’s time to soldier up.”

Javy said, “That’s bullshit.”

Saren said, “That’s business.”

Finally, he and Saren agreed on something.

“I think we have the primary incoming” Picador said. “Grey Ford Americar with a local driver. I can make out two people in the backseat, but I can’t get the right angle for a proper ID.”

Through Fitz’s eyecam Marcos saw the Americar roll to a stop in front of the entrance. The driver kept the engine going as two people stepped out of the vehicle. Marcos focused on the Asian man. He was carrying a small red suitcase. Then he looked at the other passenger.

“Pic, are you seeing this?” It was Black Mamba for sure. She was dressed in leathers and had her hair pulled back into a ponytail. He recognized the mole beneath his friend’s left ear. Marcos tensed angrily. “You need to contact Black Mamba and let her know what’s coming.”

“The hell I do. She’s covering the target. She pulls out and we lose our payday.”

He couldn’t argue with Picador. Not in front of the men and not after he’d explained to Javy that this was business. Even if his friend was caught in the crosshairs, he had to finish the job. But that meant changing the plan.

“We’re going with plan B.”

Fitz chuckled. “I suppose you’ll tell us what that is once we start moving?”

Marcos ignored that. “Saren, I need you to head to the front of the building in case the package comes out that way. Picador, cover him with the Barret. Javy, Fitz, with me.” Marcos quietly lifted the dumpster lid and climbed out. He checked the bandolier of grenades strapped across his chest. Each was marked with one of three different colors: red, gray, yellow. When his men arrived he split the explosives between the three of them. Then they jogged toward the building’s side door. Marcos worked an autopicker into the rusty lock and stepped to the right of the door in case a guard was nearby. Fitz moved to the left, with Javy behind him.

In the space of two heartbeats, the secondhand device did its work. Marcos pulled the door open in a low crouch and brought his Colt Cobra up in the firing position.

The door opened onto a break room. Insects scurried for darker spaces as light splashed into the room. Double doors to the left led to the shop floor. A door directly ahead of him opened to a narrow hallway holding three offices and a stairwell going up. At least something from the Johnson’s intel was correct. Marcos turned his cyberears to maximum sensitivity. He motioned for the men behind him to stand statue still. Any nearby sound would hit his ears like a jackhammer. At this heightened level he heard muffled voices coming from beyond the double doors. There were three distinct sets of footsteps somewhere above him. He adjusted his hearing volume back down and signaled for Javy to hold the exit and Fitz to cover the doors leading to the shop floor.

Grenades come in all flavors. High-ex is perfect for bringing down the house, but if you just want to stir things up, there are flavors for that too. More hand signals told Fitz to ready a pair of thermal smoke grenades. They’d have 8 seconds, then things would move quickly. If Marcos could get to the high ground, he could spot the package and finish this before it spiraled out of control.

He started the count by pushing through the door ahead of him into the narrow office corridor. The count was half over when he hit the stairs. He paused for another second and then ran up the stairs two at a time. From above him he heard someone yell, “Grenade!” followed by the familiar pop and fizz of thermal smoke. He hit the top of the stairs just as a cartel man was turning to descend. He shot the man before he could get his weapon up, the suppressor making a distinctive *whup whup* sound as it discharged. The second man was leaning over the railing looking over the shop floor, trying to get a better sense of the situation going on downstairs. Marcos shot

him and scanned for the third man. He didn't see him right away, so he pulled two of the yellow grenades off his bandolier and tossed them over the edge.

Flash bang. Marcos ducked back into the stairwell as the grenades went off. Shouts of confusion turned into anger and then gunfire. Marcos popped up out of the stairwell, swinging his weapon to the left and then right. He knew there was a third man up here, but he couldn't locate him. There wasn't any time to stay pinned down in the stairwell. He had to take a risk.

Fitz screamed, "Contact!" More gunfire erupted from downstairs.

Marcos hustled to the lip of the catwalk and stared down into the chaos of thermal smoke and gunfire. The space below looked more like a club in full thrall than the shop it was intended to be. He switched to ultrasound, and the room below shifted into a kaleidoscope of patterns and waves. He could make out four distinct groups moving erratically through the room. The MET soldiers were easiest to spot. They moved with the rehearsed confidence of a military unit that had seen combat before. The team split. Half moved towards the front entrance and the remaining three shooters turned back to provide fire support to a disorganized group of men firing blindly into the break room. That had to be the cartel men.

Marcos said, "Fitz, Javy, fall back. You can't hold that room."

"What about you?" Fitz's voice was strained.

"Go, I'll find another exit."

Marcos heard footsteps behind him. He spun, going into a crouch. The third cartel soldier was running at him, Uzi raised. Marcos aimed for the legs, hoping to throw off the man's aim. The burst struck the cartel soldier in the thigh. Marcos continued to fire, aiming where he thought the man would fall, ensuring a clean kill. He climbed to his feet, no closer to knowing where the package was. He peered over the edge again. This time he spotted Herrera and her men. They'd taken up defensive positions behind some type of barricade and weren't making an effort to leave. They didn't have the suitcase either.

"The Johnson is withdrawing!" Saren shouted.

"Does he have the package?" Marcos asked.

"No. Neither does Black Mamba."

It felt wrong. There hadn't been enough time to make the deal. Mr. Johnson should still have the suitcase. Marcos scanned for the MET2000 team. They were already at the door. Two soldiers went out first. He didn't see the suitcase on either of them. Landeros was next. His body jerked violently

as soon as he stepped through the doorway, and he tumbled back into the building as if yanked by a cord. The MET2000 soldiers were screaming and pointing in different directions. There was a hole the size of a troll's fist in the center of the man's chest.

"Pic, was that your shot?"

"No."

"Landeros is down. I think a sniper took him out."

Picador cut in over the commlink channel, "Christ, Marcos. You've got bigger problems than that. Heavies are moving on the location. Four MPUVs covering an Appaloosa. South road, 2400 yards out. Contact in under two minutes."

"Are you sure they're zeroing on this building?"

"Aztech decals, Marcos. I can't be sure they're headed for you, but my gut says yes. Wherever they're headed, they mean business. Get clear."

"Fuck." His gut told him he was missing something. Below him, the MET troops were redeploying, half covering Herrera's men while the ones that had been supporting the cartel soldiers opened fire on them. Marcos spotted the suitcase out in the open, near a rusting block of machinery, forgotten by everyone involved.

He said, "I need to know something first." He jumped down into the smoke, ceramic bone lacing absorbing the impact. He made a beeline for the package and dove to the ground beside it. Gunshots chewed through the air above him. He grabbed the package and backed toward the row of offices, shooting blindly as he did. He unzipped the suitcase the moment he was behind cover.

Empty.

Picador sounded impatient. "Get out of there, Marcos!"

A distraction. He looked back towards the lobby. The MET2000 boys had Herrera's people pinned down. The few cartel soldiers to survive the original betrayal had found cover and were screaming at the MET2000 soldiers to hold their fire. It started to make sense.

"The Johnson sent us after a secondary target," Marcos said. "It was a set up. Landeros, Herrera, the meet itself was the target. We're the distraction."

"Get out now!"

The thermal smoke was starting to dissipate. The gunfire had all but stopped, the opposing forces now trading shouts instead of bullets. Underneath their screaming came the rumble of military vehicles grinding to a stop.

"It might be too late for that."

“AGENT”

POSTED BY: MARCOS

VITAL STATS: “AGENT”

Age: Unknown **Height:** 1.83 m
Weight: 90 kg **Hair:** Brown
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** Yes (Adept)

If you are going to fight well in the jungle, you need to use the gifts the terrain gives you. Sometimes that means knowing the contours of the land beneath the ground cover, or knowing which trees provide good cover and which will dissolve any exposed skin that touches with them. But beyond that, fighting well in the jungle means understanding that you are not going to sweep over your opponent with a massed phalanx of soldiers, and you are not going to overwhelm them with a sudden charge of armored vehicles. No, you are going to sneak up to your enemy, stay hidden, target them with shots from sources they never see. You are going to make them always think about what it is they are not seeing and what is waiting for them behind the next tree. You are going to train them to see everything in the jungle as a possible threat. If you do it right, you will kill some, the ones that survive you will make afraid of the rainforest and the things waiting for them inside it.

The man known as “Agent” is a force of chaos and fear in the jungle near Bogotá right now. Officially, he is not part of the war—his name, supposedly, is either Alexander Williams or Gregory Metcalfe, and he works for a Horizon-owned trid station in Bogotá. Everyone who has heard of him, including his ostensible co-workers, know that this is just a cover, and pretty much all of them assume that he’s part of the Dawkins Group. This means that his efforts will generally work to support Amazonia, though of course Horizon reserves the right to double-cross de facto allies if it seems in their best interest to do so.

- Generally, if it’s a straight-up Amazonia vs. Aztlan deal, the Dawkins folks will side with Amazonia all the time. But things get a little more complicated when you branch out to other activities occurring in the area. Take Saeder-Krupp’s talislegging efforts in the Amazon rainforest. Any telesma that Amazonia possesses is likely to stay in Amazonia; anything Saeder-Krupp finds, by contrast, is likely to find its way to the open market, which increases Horizon’s chances of getting their hands on it. Horizon, then, is willing to lend some covert assistance to S-K teams wandering around the jungle.
- Frosty

- Agent’s not going to get caught up in too much of this sort of thing, seeing as social adepts are not best used as tour guides. He has been known, though, to be useful at helping S-K expeditionary teams cross through hostile territory so they can either make their way into the jungle or back to some form of transportation.
- Thorn

Those are the facts about Agent, as far as they go. The rest is supposition and rumor.

Agent is a man who understands the many ways wars can be fought. He leaves the bullets, rockets, and missiles to others. Instead, he fights with information, propaganda, and fear. In particular, Agent seems to be cultivating the aura of dread that surrounds the jungle, convincing hostile forces that maybe it’s not a good idea to enter there. He has a number of tools at his disposal, and many of them involve nothing more than good old-fashioned talking.

One of the tricks to maintaining a steady insurgent effort is to maintain the energy and passion of the people who would fight for your cause. If they lose their anger and their taste for a fight, and if the pace or ferocity of their attacks subsequently drops, then the demoralizing effect of their constant attacks will fade. And if your guerilla war isn’t demoralizing to the enemy, then it’s all but over.

Agent, in his various guises, tours the rainforest, finding all the Amazonian cells he can, and inspiring them to keep up the fight. Like any good business executive—especially one working for Horizon—he brings along a visual presentation that packs an emotional wallop and gets his audience where he needs them to be. Finding trid footage that makes Aztlan and Aztechnology look bad is not the most difficult thing to do in the world, especially when you have few scruples about editing footage to cast it in as negative a light as possible, or just plain inventing the footage you need. His presentation includes some information about how Aztlan is cracking down on the citizens of Bogotá, but it’s a little light on that side, because if Amazonian troops think too hard about that matter, they’ll realize they’re not doing the citizens a whole lot of favors themselves. The majority of Agent’s presentation focuses on what Aztlan is doing to the environment, from spreading Sangre Del Diablo trees to clearing large patches of jungle for landing strips and encampments to summoning toxic spirits that pollute vast swaths of the countryside.

- One of the major points he’s been working on lately is that the toxic shamans known as Absolute Equilibrium and Final Judgment are working with Aztlan’s protection. While it’s true that the pair of them appear on Aztlan’s Most Wanted list, Agent (in his various guises) has been insinuating that their efforts to put an end to the shamans’ activities are half-hearted at best. Either the spirits are functioning with the tacit support of the Aztlan government, he tells the people he encounters, or Aztlan must have far less control over the streets of Bogotá than they’d like people to believe. If the people he’s talking to believe either story, that’s just fine with him.
- Sunshine

If simply making a series of presentations were enough to keep a populace in a state of violent uprising, though, there would be violence and unrest in every corner of the globe (yes, yes, I know some of you think we're already at that point, but I promise you that we are not). Agent's activities go far beyond the mere dissemination of propaganda, and it is this work that makes him a rapidly growing legend.

Agent spends almost as much time with Aztlan troops as he does with those from Amazonia. His job there is to sow disinformation and discord, persuading the commanders of the various units that they need to worry more about being stabbed in the back than shot in the face. One of his more significant recent coups was intercepting all of the orders going to a unit of Leopard Guard troops over the course of a three-hour period, including the orders to support an infantry advance southwest of the city. The unit failed to advance, of course, and as a result the Aztlan infantry was routed.

That night, as the infantry commanders bemoaned their losses, they were joined by an old friend, a drinking buddy they all felt like they had known for a long time, though none of them could remember quite how they had met him. He sympathized with their plight, and listened carefully as they bemoaned the incompetence



Artist's signature: *o/koe*



and/or laziness of the Leopard unit that was supposed to be at their disposal. By the end of their conversation, the commanders were all agreed that the leaders of the Leopard unit were traitors who could not be trusted, and that the next time they saw them on the field of battle, they would be well advised to take them out, rather than aiming for their supposed Amazonian enemies.

Both units took the field less than a week later. Not a single officer of the Leopard Guard unit emerged alive. Aztlan has not, of course, acknowledged a friendly fire death in the course of this entire war, but sources who saw the bodies say they all seemed to have exit wounds at the front of their bodies.

- I'll bet that there's some trideo footage of this battle, arranged by Agent, that's being saved up for release at the proper time. I can think of a good half-dozen uses for footage showing Aztlan soldiers shooting other Aztlan soldiers in the back.
- Dr. Spin

There is no telling just how many units Agent has infiltrated in this fashion. Aztlan has started to connect enough of his alleged actions to know the sort of things to look out for, and they have sent Awakened agents of their own out to track the man down. It's difficult work, as they have not yet been able to conclusively identify his astral signature, but things are going to be more complicated for him. How he operates once people know that they need to be on the lookout for him will be an interesting question.

- Along with his more independent activities, Agent is thought to be working on developing some of the Dawkins Group's larger plans for the war. While the troops fight the war of military superiority, the Dawkins Group leads the battle to demonstrate superiority in the field of propaganda and information manipulation. The better they can do at shaping public perceptions of the war, the more clients they'll be able to win away from the Aztechnology PR machine—at least, that's what they keep telling themselves. Look for the propaganda war to heat up in the near future.
- Dr. Spin

One of the great puzzles about Agent is that despite the fact that he seems to be a social adept of considerable power, he is generally described as having a right cyberarm. There are a lot of theories about this—the most common being that it's deltaware and thus did not interfere with his adept capabilities too much. This story is bolstered by the fact that Agent recently found himself in a sticky situation where he fell into the hands of some spirits who were quite immune to his persuasive powers. They worked him over pretty good in an attempt to extract information, becoming quite creative with applications of acid to his arm. The rumors say that

the arm was so damaged it had to be replaced, and Agent is working diligently to find out who summoned the spirits.

I don't buy this story, though. The story of Agent's capture makes him seem far more incautious than I know him to be. I believe he's using superficial cybernetics to make it appear that he has a cyberarm. The only reason he would be doing that is because he's heard these rumors, and he has a vested interest in tracking down spirits who are prone to employing torture.

- I'm guessing he hopes the toxic shamans known as "Final Judgment" and "Absolute Equilibrium" will be shaken out by his carrying on this charade. Plenty of people would like any trail they can get to those guys, since the bounty on their heads are so large.
- Hard Exit
- I doubt they'd reveal themselves just because someone's playing games.
- Marcos
- Agent's games tend to be pretty good. This is likely just his opening move.
- Picador

"AGENT"

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	4	5	3	6	5	5	4	6	6	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 7/2

Skills: Blades (Knives) 2 (+2), Computer 2, Data Search 2, Disguise 5, Dodge 3, First Aid 4, Forgery 6, Infiltration 4, Influence skill group 6, Intimidation (Interrogation) 5 (+2), Palming 4, Perception 5, Pilot Aircraft 4, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pistols (Holdouts) 4 (+2), Running 3, Shadowrun 4, Survival (Jungle) 3 (+2), Tracking 3

Knowledge Skills: Aztlan Politics 4, Chess 4, Horizon Corporate Structure 4, Jungle Ecology 3, PR Techniques 5, English N, Japanese 2, Spanish 6,

Qualities: Adept, Erased, First Impression, Perceptive

Adept Powers: Attribute Boost (Charisma) 2, Combat Sense, Enhanced Perception 2, Facial Sculpt 2, Improved Agility 1, Kinesics 3, Mystic Armor 1, Rapid Healing 3, Voice Control

Gear: 50 rounds APDS ammo (for hold-out), Area jammer (Rating 9), autopicker (Rating 3), commlink [custom; Response 5, Signal 5, Firewall 6, System 4], contact lenses [Rating 3, w/ image link, low-light vision, smartlink], 5 x fake SINS (Rating 6), FFBA shirt, 3 doses Laés, 5 doses neuro-stun, Victory Globetrotter Line Heavy Armor Clothing, 5 doses warp

Weapons:

Ceramic Knife (disguised as pen) [Blade, Reach -, DV 3P, AP —]

Streetline Special [Hold-out, DV 4P, AP -4, SS, RC -, 6(c), w/ smartgun]

AKUCHI

POSTED BY: BLACK MAMBA

VITAL STATS: AKUCHI

Age: 38	Height: 1.75 m
Weight: 68 kg	Hair: Black
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: No

When you don't have GridGuide, when you don't have any enforcement of traffic laws, and when the majority of drivers don't have a license or any actual education in the rules of the road, driving becomes like surfing. To be a good driver, you have to stay just ahead of the roiling wave that's pushing you ahead, but not so far ahead that you can't grab a part of its speed. You have to be nimble, agile, and careful not to let that wave crash over your head and wipe you out.

Akuchi is a very good driver.

Driving in Lagos presents just about every challenge the Sixth World has to offer. There are orderly streets full of sluggish business travelers on Lagos Island. There are thoroughfares that abruptly turn into markets, and these markets seem to never appear at the same place twice. There are areas that are primarily populated by devil rats and shedim, where the roads are winding, narrow paths of concrete sitting between enormous, weed-filled potholes. And everywhere you go, there is someone looking in your direction who is struck by the idea that if they killed you, they would be able to take your stuff or otherwise benefit from your death. Most of the time they shake their heads and ignore this idea, but they act on it often enough to keep life in the city interesting.

- You also have to worry about their ability to team up. As is the case in any city with a ridiculously high crime rate, Lagos has a good supply of experienced criminals, and when you have that many people of that nature, they'll generally find ways to work together for their overall good (that's *their* overall good, not *the* overall good). This means you have to be careful when a couple of them decide to go after you—there's a decent chance that they're just trying to chase you into the waiting arms of their buddies.
- Kane

Akuchi has covered every bit of ground in the city, he has worked for wealthy clients and for those who have only what they lift from other people's pockets, and he has survived the anger of one of the largest tribes in the area for many years. If you want to get from point A to point B in Lagos, he is the man you want driving the vehicle that takes you there.

Akuchi (whose name means "wealth from God") is a lifelong resident of Lagos, and he grew up in the middle of the divide between the Igbo and Yoruba tribes. He is an Igbo, and as

is the case with so many young, fit Igbo males, he joined a group of area boys. The area boys are like street gangs anywhere—you commit some petty vandalism and theft, and in return you get a group to belong to and to give you some protection from the other groups out there.

As an Igbo area boy, Akuchi naturally crossed paths with several Yoruba gangs, including an encounter that set him on his ultimate path in life. He was on a crew for a van robbery—the job was stopping the targeted van in the middle of its route, blast their way inside, grab anything of value, and get out. The van in question was carrying a load of sapphires, so the payday was supposed to be quite good.

- Especially in a city like Lagos. Since Matrix access can be spotty (and not everyone cares for the nuyen anyway), merchants tend to accept a wide variety of things in payment for goods and services. While stealing sapphires in a lot of cities would mean you need to find a fence, in Lagos you just need to find a merchant who accepts gems as payment. That's not tough to do.
- Traveler Jones

For the most part, the run went well, but in the chaos of the events, the van pivoted in a way Akuchi did not expect, and he found himself staring directly into the lens of a camera inside the van. The Yoruban merchants who were the target of the smash-and-grab thus ended up with a nice recording of his face.

This worried the young Akuchi, and he was frantic for a time, tracking down any decker he could find and trying to get his image erased so that the Yoruba wouldn't be able to find him and exact their revenge. Everyone he spoke to told him the same thing—they might have copied the picture a hundred times already, and the cost of tracking down all those files was more than a young area boy could afford. So for a while he lived in fear, waiting for the hit squad he was sure was coming his way.

But he survived. Part of that was due to the fact that neither the Yoruba nor the Igbo can afford massive efforts to take out every little punk who irritates them, but part of that was due to his skill at avoiding trouble and staying a step ahead of anyone who came after him. His state of apprehensiveness only increased his driving ability, as he became more practiced at getting out of a tight situation, no matter how cramped and confined it might be.

- I thought riggers just ran over people who got in their way.
- Slamm-O!
- No. They leave dents in your vehicle.
- Rigger X
- And it's not always about people. Streets in Lagos change their width at the drop of a hat, and if someone wants to trap you, you can bet they'll take advantage of those choke points. If you want to stay alive and leave yourself space to maneuver, you need to understand when you are being herded, and you need to not go where the people doing the herding want you to be. That

kind of anticipation separates the really good from the great, and Akuchi anticipates as well as anyone I've ever seen.

• 2XL

As his career developed, Akuchi developed a fondness for motorcycles, especially his trademark Thundercloud Contrail. This meant that he served less as a getaway driver, and more often as a courier/mobile cavalry. One of the stories told most often about him is the run he made from the broken roads north of Lagos to the docks of Apapa in thirty minutes carrying a backpack full of nitroglycerin. He had to average ninety kilometers per hour the whole way, regardless of the quality of the streets he encountered or the traffic. He cut through the dead zone of Surulere, reasonably figuring that he wouldn't encounter much traffic there, but there was always the chance he would have to deal with the shedim. Which turned out to be the case.

When Akuchi finally arrived in Apapa, the boat he was supposed to meet was already heading out to sea. Witnesses say that Akuchi whipped off the backpack, holding it away from his body to keep any impact from setting off the nitro, then he drove to the end of a pier, where a single plank happened to be leaning against a crate. He used it as a ramp, launched himself off the pier (driving with one hand, since the other was busy holding the backpack), and landed smoothly on the outgoing boat.

Once he had landed, observers saw that there was something wedged near the back wheel of his bike, and



closer inspection revealed it to be a forearm that had been ripped off its body. When this was pointed out to Akuchi, he shrugged and said, “I guess they were closer to me than I had thought.”

- I know some people are impressed by displays of coolness under pressure like that, but messing around with shedim doesn't strike me as especially brave or bold. It's stupid. People avoid places like Surulere for a reason.
- Traveler Jones

This unflappability is a key part of Akuchi's demeanor and his success, and it ties to his overall worldview. While he certainly is skilled at what he does, he is the first to point out that luck plays a significant role in his continued existence among the living. When it comes to his dash across the city, he is quick to point out that the only reason it was, in the end, successful was that the plank happened to be in the right place at the end of the pier. Without that, all of his efforts would have come to nothing. He long ago came to the acceptance of the fact that there are some things in his life that are out of his control, and that has led him to a strong belief in fate. He does not let it make him slack, or reduce his vigilance one bit, but he allows it to give him a sense of calm. He does not worry about the mission he is about to go on, because if he is supposed to succeed, he will succeed. If it is his time to die, he will die. His own worries will do nothing to change that.

- This gives him a reckless edge. He's willing to take chances others might not because he figures if he's supposed to make it through, he'll somehow survive. He doesn't get stupid reckless, though—he won't drive into a brick wall and expect the wall to get out of his way—but he'll go ahead and try the things that other people consider and then reject. And he'll do it without a change in his heart rate.
- Frosty

While Akuchi takes extreme care in planning for individual missions, he is less careful in planning the overall arc of his career. His conflict with the Yoruba did not come because he has a grudge against them, or because he carries some strong sense of tribal pride. It happened just because that's the way things worked out. After the sapphire heist where Akuchi got captured on camera, the Yoruba were understandably reluctant to engage Akuchi's services. The Igbo, on the other hand, were happy to keep throwing jobs his way, and it's not surprising that many of the runs for which the Igbo hired Akuchi hurt the Yoruba. His skill usually meant he succeeded in his runs (or at least made a clean getaway once a run fell apart), so over the years he racked up an impressive rap sheet, at least as far as the Yoruba were concerned. And so, without intending it, and with no political or tribal goals in mind, Akuchi became something of a folk hero for the Igbo, while the Yoruba had him high on their list of public enemies.

Akuchi's tendencies to drift have also kept him from becoming a part of a regular team. There are certain crews that are reliable sources of income for him, but they do not consider Akuchi one of their number. He is hired wheels, and both he and the people who hire him are content with this arrangement. It has gotten to the point that Akuchi has significant discretion in the runs he chooses, as he is in demand, both for his skills and for his notoriety. When Akuchi accompanies a team on a run, people notice, and that gives the group an instant boost in status.

- It's starting to get a little out of control for him. It's one thing when people see you walk into a room and quake a little in fear because of your reputation, or give you that extra little bit of deference. But when word starts traveling around as soon as you are hired, and people get excited that you're going to work and they're really interested in what you'll be doing—well, that sort of thing is no good.
- Frosty
- It would be smart for him to lay low for a while. It doesn't take much money to get by in Lagos, and I'd imagine that Akuchi has some nuyen socked away somewhere. He should sit back, sip on palm wine for a while, let the Yoruba cool off a little, and let the Igbo focus their positive attention on someone else, someone like Halim.
- Traveler Jones
- Maybe he'll do that. But then again, maybe some job will come by that will catch his attention, and he'll do it, because he's not the kind of guy that's content to do nothing when there's an interesting something waiting for him out there.
- Black Mamba
- Then he's putting his thumb on the scales of fate, on not on the side that's going to help him.
- Traveler Jones

While Akuchi is a fatalist, he is not an idiot, and he has noticed that teams protect each other before they rally around the hired wheelman. He has worked over the years to hone his drone rigging techniques, as that provides him with a support network that will put his needs ahead of anyone else's. When it comes to drone selection, he's not too worried about infiltration or other covert ops—that's not usually within the scope of his duties. His primary concerns are seeing trouble before it approaches him and making sure he can either stop it or avoid it, so he favors drones that can give him a good view of his surroundings and stop any enemies before they get close enough to hurt him.

He will need to be watching carefully in coming days, because word on the streets of Lagos is that the Yoruba are losing patience with him. They have asked him to stop being involved in runs against their interests, but his rather haphazard method of selecting runs (and his ties with many Igbo leaders and strongmen) means that, sooner or later, he does things that the Yoruba don't like, and their anger at him increases again. At some point, they inevitably will move from asking him to leave them alone to taking stronger measures, and the strength and numbers of Yoruba in Lagos means he will have to be at the peak of his powers to avoid whatever they have planned for him. Or, alternately, fate will have to be on his side and be willing to let him stay alive for a little while longer.

- Mamba's talking about what Akuchi does on land, but he's not bad on water. Ain't too many people that like to venture onto Lagos Lagoon, with its pollution and ammits and total lack of cover, but Akuchi knows the value of speed, and he knows how fast you can go on the open water. He's not as good on the water as on land, but it's not as crowded there, and he can get to where he needs to be quick enough.
- Kane

AKUCHI

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
2 6 5 (8) 3 3 5 4 3 6 0.2 10 (13) 1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 9/10

Armor (B/I): 8/7

Skills: Armorer 2, Automotive Mechanic 5, Blades 4, Demolitions 2, Electronics skill group 5, Electronic Warfare 2, Intimidation 3, Locksmith 2, Nautical Mechanic 2, Perception 4, Pilot Ground Craft 7, Pilot Watercraft 4, Pistols 4, Street Knowledge 2

Qualities: Aptitude (Pilot Ground Craft), Guts, Home Ground (Ajegunle)

Augmentations: Aluminum bone lacing, cyberears [Rating 1, w/ balance augmenter], cybereyes [Rating 2, w/ smartlink, thermographic vision, vision enhancement 3], reaction enhancers 1, wired reflexes 2

Gear: Ammonium nitrate (1 kilo), area jammer 6, armor jacket, commlink (implanted, custom, Response 5, Signal 4, Firewall 4, System 6), control rig, 3 x detonator caps, Knight Errant P4, 3 x MCT Fly-Spy drones [w/ chameleon coating, Chaser 5, Maneuver 3], 2 x MCT-Nissan Roto-drones [w/ Chaser 5, flotation, Maneuver 3, Targeting (Automatics) 4, weapon mount (normal, external, fixed, remote; HK 227X mounted on each drone), radio detonator, Thundercloud Contrail [w/ anti-theft system, engine customization (acceleration), engine customization (speed), improved sensor array, oil slick sprayer, rigger adaptation], Zemlya-Poltava Crest [w/ additional fuel tank, armor, engine customization (acceleration), rigger adaptation]

Programs/Complex Forms: Command 6, ECCM 4, Encrypt 3, Scan 4, Stealth 2

Weapons:

Ares Predator IV [Heavy pistol, 5P, AP -1, SA, —, 15 (c)]

Vibro Sword [Blade, Reach 1, DV 6P, AP -2]

CAYMAN

POSTED BY: RISER

Cayman is what you would call a runner's runner. He's never made that one big, spectacular score we sometimes talk about. He's never assassinated a political leader or trid star, never extracted the CEO of an AA-or-larger corp, and he's never won the heart of a glamorous high society guy or gal who was intrigued by his street-level grit.

No, all Cayman has done is accept jobs, get into and out of some dangerous and complicated straits, and conducted himself with enough toughness and grit to make strangers instinctively look down as he passes so that they don't inadvertently make eye contact. And if that's not enough to make you a legend in this business, then I'm changing jobs.

It may not be accurate to say that Cayman chose the running life, but he kind of fell into it because he wasn't ever that interested in anything else. He was born in Savannah, and his real name is Tim Brock (but don't ever, *ever* call him Tim to his face). As the third son of a Georgia longshoreman, Cayman didn't have a lot of money in his youth, but his brothers made up for that in terms of blows to the head. To hear him tell it, no matter how much he grew, they always had at least six inches and thirty pounds on him, and they never tired of reminding him of this size differential.

- He's a big guy, but he kind of had a case of small-dog syndrome in his early days, always looking to prove himself. He's gotten over that, thankfully, which makes him a lot safer to run with.
- Stone

He resented their treatment when he was young, but once he hit adolescence and ran into the gangs that surrounded the docks, he became grateful for the lessons in toughness they taught him. He took a few lumps, of course—he has a patch of white hair over a long scar on the back of his head—but he survived, and he learned how to carry himself in a way that makes people decide that it's best not to mess with you. While some of his peers were scratching and clawing their way into juvenile hall detention cells, he was keeping the violence to a minimum by making sure people believed that if they started something, they'd get the worst of it.

By keeping his nose relatively clean, Cayman gave himself the chance for something a lot of his peers couldn't get—a normal, legitimate life. He tried security work, military service, and law enforcement, and none of them suited him. He never even thought about a desk job, and none of his families or friends tried to push him in that direction.

His eventual path became more clear when his brother Burt was killed in an armored-car heist. He heard the news when he was woken up by one of his other brothers, Vern, so that he could go out and get the people who had done in Burt. Vern told him that a Savannah gang, the Dock Lords, had intercepted them after the heist, taken the loot, and killed Burt. Cayman has groggy, but he had enough of his senses about him to start asking questions, like: How did the Dock Lords know about the

job? Did any of the other people in on the job get hurt besides Burt? Who told Vern that the Dock Lords were responsible for Burt's death?

- Sometimes I think (when I have too much time on my hands) that this is one of the things that separates shadowrunners from gangers or organized criminals. For the boys in the latter groups, their motivation and tactics are pretty simple and straightforward, and they're valued for their ability to carry out orders without asking questions. If you're going to be a good shadowrunner—and a live shadowrunner—you can't just follow orders. You have to think about what's going on around you, about who's trying to throw you over, and things like that. Once Cayman started thinking that way, he wasn't going to be a very effective dock punk.
- Thorn

The answers Cayman got convinced him that Vern was barking up the wrong tree. He told Vern that they weren't going to go after the Dock Lords, Vern said the hell they weren't, and they punched it out for a while. Eventually Cayman's argument and fists carried the day, and they went back home.

Cayman learned two lessons from this incident: First, don't let other people control the information you need to know; and second, always be prepared to back up your position with a punch.

- He's fanatical about that first point, but he never forgets the "need to know" qualifier. He understands that there are things Mr. Johnson isn't going to tell him, and he knows a lot of times that's for the best. Take a run he did in Denver not too long ago. He was brought in by the CAS Department of Domestic Investigations to talk to some of their assets. Some UCAS agents had been waving cash in their face, and Cayman was part of a team that was supposed to scare them into staying on the strait and narrow. He made certain to get the information he needed to know—who the assets were, their background, the chances they might get violent if threatened, that kind of thing—but he also knew there were certain questions he shouldn't ask. As he was going out and doing his job, he noticed a common thread in the people he was intimidating—they were all metas, and they all seemed more confused than scared by his visit. He's not an idiot—he figured out that what he was doing was just for show, that the scare wouldn't actually change anything, and that there must be some reason that CAS officials wanted to pretend they were keeping their assets from contacting UCAS folks without actually doing anything effective about it. If he dug, he might be able to figure out the true motives of what the people who were paying him were up to, but he knew that wasn't his job, so he let that information stay in the control of the people who hired him.
- Traveler Jones
- CAS letting meta assets stay in contact with UCAS agents? My guess is this is a cooperative effort between the CAS and anti-Lesker UCAS factions, and these assets will be used to spread evidence of Lesker's racist past once it's uncovered.
- Kay St. Irregular



VITAL STATS: CAYMAN

Age: 44

Height: 1.85 m

Weight: 104 kg

Hair: Black with grey

Eyes: Brown

Gender: Male

Metatype: Human

Awakened: No



After he got Vern calmed down, Cayman spent a few weeks looking into his brother's death and discovered that he had been killed by members of his own crew so they wouldn't have to pay him his share. Then they told Vern the Dock Lords had done it, because that would have the additional benefit of either getting rid of a few members of a rival gang, or eliminating the two surviving brothers of Burt who may someday develop a thirst for vengeance.

Unfortunately for them, Cayman was still alive, and his thirst became quite powerful. He played the role of fixer and Mr. Johnson for his first shadowrun, gathering a few friends for a psychological campaign against Burt's former crew. He didn't want them to just die—he first wanted them to be terrified of the death that was coming, and *then* he wanted them dead. From leaving messages scrawled on mirrors to placing body parts left beds to cuing up disturbing trideo images to greet targets in unexpected locations, Cayman and his crew displayed commendable imagination in putting the members of the crew on edge, right up until he and his crew delivered the final blows to each member.

Cayman could not exactly be described as having fun on this run, but he gained a certain satisfaction from exacting revenge. He also, though, noticed the risks of having too much emotional investment in a mission, and he decided it would be better for him to remain detached whenever possible. He is not as flashy as he was when he was getting revenge. His demeanor is generally businesslike, if a bit gruff, and he worries far more about getting paid than he does about possible slights to his character.

- Yeah, you can call this guy just about every name in the book, and even if you are a true artist in the medium of vulgarity, he won't care. On the other hand, ask him a question that insinuates that maybe he's not fully prepared for the mission at hand ("You brought your ammo with you, right?") and he bristles.
- Black Mamba
- "Bristles" meaning "punches you in the brain."
- Stone

This is not to say that he has lost his taste for revenge. When people do wrong by him, he makes sure they know it and they pay for it. There's a street doc in Seattle who has a large scar on the front and back of his hand from a time when Cayman pinned that hand to a table with a rather large knife, which was his way of letting the doc know that he was disappointed that the doc did not remember all the specs of a cyberarm he'd recently implanted in one of Cayman's targets. Like I said before, Cayman takes his information seriously, and he does not appreciate people who mislead him.

Cayman has functioned as a team leader on some occasions, but he seems most comfortable in the role of a hired gun. He's not much of a people person, so he usually does not want to put in the effort that leading a group requires. He's skilled with a wide variety of weapons, and he's creative enough with them to be useful on a wide variety of missions.

He knows when it's important to shoot accurately and when it's important to just shoot. He was in a bar in the Seattle Barrens once when some members of the Finnigan family (a group with whom he's had run-ins in the past) stormed in, guns out, and got the drop on him. There was no way he'd be able to get off a good shot at any of them before they filled him with lead, but he knew he didn't need a good shot. He had a shotgun at his side, and he unloaded without fully raising it. The shot went into the floor, not coming close to hitting anyone, but it was enough. He had already started moving when he fired the shot (using the gun's recoil to push him backward), so the first volley from the Finnigans missed him. The bar erupted at Cayman's shot, and in the chaos he got into a covered position where he could start picking off Mafiosi until they decided maybe they should leave him alone.

- This led to a few Finnigans deciding that it was time for Cayman to be dead, which led to a few Finnigans bleeding out on the streets of Seattle, which led to some of the higher-ups in the family taking notice and deciding to put a price on Cayman's head. The upshot is, Cayman is likely to stay away from Seattle for the immediate future. I hear he's gone abroad, possibly to Africa.
- Sunshine
- No better excuse to travel than having a price on your head, I always say.
- Hard Exit

This is not to say that he goes into every situation guns blazing. He knows that sometimes a gun does its best work by being seen, not heard. He was working on an extraction once where the executive being removed was not too eager to leave. He led Cayman's group on a chase to a rooftop high over Manhattan. The executive had a helicopter that was supposed to pick him up, but the hacker of Cayman's group was playing havoc with it, and it was approaching the rooftop with a great deal of uncertainty. As it closed in, Cayman revealed a weapon he'd stowed on the rooftop, anticipating just this eventuality. It was a Thunderstruck Gauss Rifle. Not wishing to be a sitting duck, the helicopter promptly turned around (with the hacker's assistance) and left the now-acquiescent executive alone.

- Come on—who just leaves a Thunderstruck sitting on a rooftop on the off chance you need it? It's not the easiest thing to make unnoticeable.
- Butch
- One spell to conceal the thing, another spell to put a gentle suggestion in the mind of your target, and as long as the target's not Awakened—and he wasn't—then you've got a workable plan.
- Jimmy No

As the stories show, Cayman isn't one for fancy trick shots or show-off maneuvers. He's just interested in what works. He's reliable, tenacious, and fearless—the qualities we all want in the members of our team. He may not like you much, he may seem a little grumpy, but he'll stay with a job, he'll do it well, and he'll increase your chances of survival. What more do you want?

CAYMAN

B 5 **A** 7 **R** 4(6) **S** 5(7) **C** 3 **I** 5 **L** 4 **W** 6 **Edg** 6 **Ess** 0.33 **Init** 9(11) **IP** 1(3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11

Armor (B/I): 10/7

Skills: Armorer 2, Clubs 4, Demolitions (Plastic Explosives) 3 (+2), Exotic Ranged Weapon (Flamethrower) 4, Firearms skill group 6, First Aid 3, Gunnery (Artillery) 4 (+2), Heavy Weapons (Assault Cannons) 7 (+2), Infiltration 2, Intimidation 4, Parachuting 2, Perception 4, Running 3, Survival 2, Throwing Weapons (Grenades) 3 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: CAS Gangs 2, Chess 3, Firearms Manufacturers 5, Mid-Twentieth Century Music 3, Runner Hangouts 3, Seattle Streets 4, Small Squadron Tactics 4, English N, Spanish 2, Sperethiel 1

Qualities: Aptitude (Heavy Weapons), Exceptional Attribute (Agility), Guts, Toughness, Wanted

Augmentations: (all betaware) Adrenaline pump 2, aluminum bone lacing, cyberarm [Agility 3, Armor 3, Body 3, Strength 3, w/ cyberarm gyromount, large smuggling compartment] cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ flare compensation, low-light vision, smartlink, thermographic vision, vision enhancement 2, vision magnification], muscle augmentation 2, platelet factories, wired reflexes 2

Gear: 100 rounds APDS ammo (50 Heavy Pistol, 50 shotgun), armor vest, commlink (Hermes Ikon w/ Iris Orb, Response 4, Signal 3, Firewall 3, System 3), 100 rounds EX-ex ammo (Heavy Pistol), 2 x fake licenses for weapons (Rating 5), 2 x fake SINS (Rating 4), form-fitting body armor (half-suit) 20 rounds gel ammo (Shotgun), 1 kg plastic explosive (Rating 10), 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (Heavy Pistol)

Weapons:

Ares Predator IV [Heavy Pistol, DV 5P, AP -1 or -5, SA, —, 15 (c), w/ APDS ammo, EX-ex ammo, personalized grip, smartlink, stick-n-shock ammo]

Ares Thunderstruck Gauss Rifle [Assault cannon, DV 9P, AP -4, SA, RC (1), 10 (c) w/ peak discharge battery, hip pad bracing system and built-in laser sight]

Remington 990 [Shotgun, DV 7P, AP -1 or -5, SA, (1), 8(m), w/ APDS ammo, gel rounds, personalized grip, smartlink]

10 fragmentation grenades [Grenade, DV 12P(f), AP +5, Blast -1/m]

10 high-explosive grenades [Grenade, DV 10P, AP -2, Blast -2/m]

5 thermal smoke grenades [Grenade, DV —, AP —, Blast 10m radius]

ELIJAH

POSTED BY: WINTERHAWK

VITAL STATS: ELIJAH

Age: 46	Height: 1.79 m
Weight: 82 kg	Hair: Brown
Eyes: Green	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: Yes (Hermetic mage)

Elijah is a problem. He's intelligent, professorial, well-mannered, but if you get him on the wrong line of conversation he'll bring up theories that make Plan 9 look mainstream. Then, when you're willing to write him off as some sort of nutjob who has been sheltered in academia too long to remember what the actual world really looks like, he'll explain to you the evidence for the theories he's supporting, he'll lay it all out for you until you see the logic of what he's saying, and you'll get to a point where you believe that either he really is on to something or he has a powerful gift for infecting people with his own insanity. Then you'll notice that as far-out as his theories may be, the man himself is careful in his actions, avoiding chasing a wild theory to an irrational end. So you ask yourself, if he's so careful and logical in what he does, just how far off base can his theories be?

Maybe you solve the problem of Elijah by figuring that he spends most of his time locked up in some ivory tower somewhere, that he's got a bunch of theories that sound great in the isolated chamber where he works, but they'd melt in the heat of reality. Just like the man himself, you think. He doesn't look like much. Glasses, thinning hair, a frame that seems like it's threatening to get paunchy. What can he know about the way things really work on the streets?

Allow me to give you a piece of advice. Never, ever have thoughts like that when Elijah is on the other side of an operation from you. Underestimate him, even for a second, and you'll give him all the space he needs to call up spirits that are perfectly attuned to the task he chooses for them, and he'll set them on you in a fashion that makes you long for the peace and calm of a class V hurricane.

- Are you speaking from sad experience here?
- Butch
- Not direct experience, no. I've known about Elijah long enough to not underestimate him if I should ever be opposite him, but I've been lucky enough—and careful enough—to not put myself in that situation. I've had some acquaintances who made this mistake, though, including one who had the earth surge beneath his feet just as he was attempting to cast a spell, sending him flat on his back and looking straight up at a spirit that looked like something Hieronymus Bosch would have painted while tripping

on mescaline. The thing came at him with tentacles that didn't care one whit for the niceties of Euclidean geometry, and when they made contact the mage was about as together and alert as someone who hasn't slept in ten days. He survived—Elijah doesn't go for unnecessary kills—but he dreams of that spirit almost every night.


- Winterhawk

Elijah probably could have gotten himself a tenure-track in any decent university thamaturgical program if that's what he wanted, but he's much happier with the life of the itinerant professor, explorer, and freelancer. He has contacts in all of the big magic-oriented organizations—Draco, Atlantean, MCT, Apep—though his relationship with Aztechnology seems to have soured lately. I don't know if there's anything more to it than that he's seen clear evidence of the kind of magic they're into and decided that it's best to keep his distance.

- There's a little more to it, from what I hear. A mage he worked with a couple of times recently sold out to the Big A, hoping to slide into the comfortable life of a wage mage. Instead of getting into peaceful and calm research, though, he found himself on the frontlines of the Az-Am war, charged with developing new defensive spells to hold off Amazonian magic. He was dropped into a war zone without being fully prepped about what he was facing, and the first time he saw battle, some geek-the-mage-first types targeted him and offed him. From Elijah's perspective, his friend was so poorly supported that he was essentially set up to fail. He trusts Aztechnology even less than most of us.
- Marcos

If you try to get Elijah to talk about his earliest days, he'll usually tell you that they don't matter much. Often this means a runner is hiding some dark secret or something that they don't want you to look into, but in Elijah's case he's right. He was raised by a couple of corp drones, got noticed for his magical talent, received the proper education, and then went out to make his way in the world. The pivotal moment that helped set him on his current path didn't occur until he was out of college, when he was in his mid-20s.

As is proper anyone who is that old, Elijah was not interested in spending all his time locked in classrooms and offices. As often as he could, he hooked up with expeditions to investigate at sites of power, places with high background counts, or locations with notable spirit activity, and that (along with spirits) has become his area of expertise. On one such expedition, he set off to visit the German city of Karlsruhe, which is notable for a number of reasons, including the fact that it has been gradually reverting to the way it looked in the 1500s, and no one is quite sure how and why this is happening. Elijah was entranced by the city, and he fell immediately into studying its odd, overly planned layout. He wasn't breaking any new ground when he noted the connection between the "spokes" of the city's primary roads and the location of mystical sites across the world, but once he opened himself up



to this odd fact, he started learning strange information from spirits that he contacted there. Perhaps the most surprising piece of information revealed to him involved Heinrich Rudolf Hertz's discovery of electromagnetic waves in the city back in the 19th century. According to the information he was gathering from spirits, Hertz was greatly assisted in his research by the layout of the city, as well as by forces of a magical nature behind the scenes pushing him in the right direction.

- Oh, good. It's the old "science was really magic all along!" argument. I love it every time it pops up.
- Snopes
- I've never made that claim. Hertz's research had to have solid scientific underpinnings—if it didn't, all of the work that resulted from it would be far more difficult to accomplish. I do not personally believe that electromagnetic waves are tied into Earth's mana field, as I have heard some people say. Rather, what I discovered in that visit to Karlsruhe was that there were powerful magic forces who wanted electromagnetic radiation discovered, and who wanted humans to harness its power. That started me on a long quest to see how humanity has been pushed and prodded in certain directions, and it has been a fruitful inquiry. The question I have yet to answer is the same one that always seems to bedevil this type of research—I may have some idea who is doing what, but it is difficult to determine why they are doing it, and toward what goal they are working.
- Elijah

In this work, Elijah had to become skilled at more than just summoning spirits and getting them to carry out a task. He had to learn how to extract information from them. This is an incredibly tricky task, as spirits are often inveterate deceivers, to the point where they often deceive themselves. It is quite possible, for example, to summon up a spirit who will tell you he is the ghost of Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, and who will present a convincing appearance and offer all the right details. You may even cast an analyze truth spell on the spirit and get nothing, because the spirit firmly believes that it is telling you the truth. None of this, however, means that the spirit is really what it claims to be. Elijah has learned that spirit research must be an exhaustive process to be effective, casting a wide net over spirit presences in the region and questioning them in detailed fashion in an effort to edge toward the truth.

One of the tricks of this business is the same as it is in any information-gathering task—tracking down and getting access to the individual spirits with the best information. As much as Elijah would like to uncover the secret history of the Sixth World, there are powerful forces, right up to the great dragon level, dedicated to keeping that information hidden. These powers are quite good at sequestering spirits, binding them to people in their service, and then sending their servants and the spirits into some isolated area with plenty of foci to keep the spirit confined and assist in rebinding it if necessary.

- You can also keep a spirit confined with a mana barrier, of course, and some groups, notable the Atlantean Foundation, are quite fond of dumping a spirit-encased barrier at the bottom of the ocean. Assuming you've got a mage who can sustain the spell, and who can maintain line-of-sight long enough to get the spell where you want it to go, this isn't a terrible solution. But where one spirit goes, another can follow, which means that there's always the risk of the barrier being dispelled when there is no one around to keep an eye on things. For good security, you need people, spirits, or both to keep a constant eye on things.
- Frosty

Elijah had one notable exploit in this area of work while tracking one particular spirit to the Lost Mine of Abo-denbo. After making his way through the Asamando ghoulish population and past the village's collection of mages, Elijah found himself in cramped quarters, exploring a vault more than five hundred meters down into the heart of the mountain. The guardians were ferocious, unleashing magical attacks on anyone they didn't recognize, and Elijah had considerable trouble advancing. He retreated, and spent days designing a strategy that recognized the fact that any attack he planned did not need to be confined by the rock walls that were hemming in many of the guardians.

When it finally came, the attack he led was built on misdirection. After a quick burst by spirits into the chamber where the target spirit was confined, Elijah's immaterial army focused its efforts on the chamber's guardians. He was able to keep them from communicating with each other, so none of the guardians were aware of how the others were faring. They also weren't aware of how often they each were calling on the services of the bound spirit to help them in their struggle.

After a crazed battle that left most of the lost mine collapsed and saw Elijah himself covered in rubble, kept alive only by a physical barrier spell that prevented the rocks from crushing him, the guardians made a miscalculation and called upon the last service of the bound spirit. Once that job was done, the spirit vanished with a shriek of triumph, stunning the guardians. Their surprise quickly turned to rage, and they commenced a search for Elijah's aura in all that rock so they could make him pay for what he did. What they saw was that all of the spirits he had summoned (or at least, the ones still on the field of battle) had amassed themselves around Elijah, and if guardians wanted to get to Elijah in the middle of his fortress of rubble, they would have to go through that army first. After a few failed attempts to dispel Elijah's physical barrier, they fled, knowing it was best to get far away before their masters found out what had happened, because they certainly had far worse things in store for the guardians than did Elijah.

- So did Elijah eventually track down that spirit? What did it tell him?
- Jimmy No
- Question one: Yes, I did. He was grateful for me freeing him, though spirit gratitude is often not equivalent to human gratitude. Question two: If I didn't reveal that information to the board of directors of the Draco Foundation, what makes you think I'm going to tell you?
- Elijah

Perhaps Elijah's greatest weakness is also the source of a considerable amount of his strength. His passion for knowledge has pushed him to develop his skills to their current level, but that passion can sometimes—rarely, but still—overwhelm his logic. Once he knows, or even believes firmly, that there is an important piece of knowledge that is obtainable and waiting for him, it is nearly impossible to dissuade him from going after him. The need to know whatever secret he has gotten wind of can be overpowering, and can make him ignore the rigorous logic he applies to most aspects of his work. If I wanted to manipulate Elijah, that's how I'd get my hooks in.

- Thanks for the heads-up, Winterhawk. Anyway, I believe that having a passion for knowledge as a flaw is far more beneficial than many runners' supposed strengths.
- Elijah
- Say, Winterhawk, when discussing weaknesses, looks like you forgot to mention that he's kind of got an ego.
- Pistons
- Of course he does. He's a mage, isn't he?
- Slamm-O!

ELIJAH

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	3	5	3	4	5	7	5	8	6	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 5/3

Skills: Conjuring skill group 6, Dodge 2, Etiquette (Spirits) 3 (+2), First Aid 3, Instruction 3, Leadership 3, Medicine 2, Navigation 2, Perception 4, Pistols 2, Sorcery skill group 5, Survival 3

Knowledge Skills: Archeology 3, Architecture 2, Folk Music (Native American) 3 (+2), Magic Artifacts 5, Magic Groups 4, Magic History 5, Metaphysics 3, Philosophy 3, English N, Japanese 2, French 3, Mandarin 2, Portuguese 3, Spanish 4, Russian 2

Qualities: Exceptional Attribute (Logic), Focused Concentration, Magician, Mentor Spirit

Initiate Level: 3

Metamagics: Centering, geomancy, quickening

Gear: Commlink [Transys Avalon w/ Novatech Navi, Response 4, Signal 4, Firewall 3, System 3], flashlight, fountain pen (spell-casting focus (manipulation spells) Rating 4), glasses [Rating 4, flare compensation, image link, low light, smartlink], GPS, 5 x magnesium torch, medkit, Mortimer of London (suit jacket, trousers, and shirt), 20m myomeric rope, rabbit's foot (summoning focus, Rating 5), respirator (Rating 4), survival kit

Weapons:

Hammerli 620s [Light pistol, DV 4P, AP —, SA, RC 1, 6(c)]

Mentor Spirit:

Snake [+2 to Detection Spells, +2 to Binding Tests; -1 die for Combat spells]

Bound Spirits:

Spirit of air (Force 5, 2 services, 2 x spirits of earth (Force 3, 2 services each), 2 x spirits of man (Force 3, 3 services each)

HAZE

POSTED BY: PISTONS

VITAL STATS: HAZE

Age: 32	Height: 1.78 m
Weight: 66 kg	Hair: Brown, dyed blonde
Eyes: Blue	Gender: Male
Metatype: Elf	Awakened: Yes (Shaman magician)

- Like a few others here, Pistons wasn't too pleased with Haze's actions in the summer of '71, when tempo was first hitting the streets of Seattle. I'm not going to rehash what happened here—you can check the archives if you're curious. While she was at the height of her anger, she threw this together, which I'm guessing she intended as a kind of tell-all smear piece. Whatever her motives, the final document winds up reading as much like a glowing review of Haze's abilities as it does a slight against his character, and I think it has a place in any rundown of the really interesting people on the streets right now. You may like Haze or hate him, but I think Pistons is quite correct when she says you have a right to know with whom you may be working.
- Fastjack

Haze has been a JackPoint user for a long time, and my choice to air his dirty laundry for all to see may not be a popular one. It certainly wasn't made lightly. But while some of you may argue that Haze has a right to his privacy, I'd say that we have a right to know what kind of person we're getting information from here, someone whom we might wind up working with—or working against. I can promise that this won't get beyond JackPoint, even if Haze is still wanted for questioning by Lone Star, Knight Errant, and EuroPol. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a rat. This is for your eyes only, and whatever the consequences of me sharing it might be, I'm prepared to accept them.

Haze is a sociopathic master manipulator and a complete monster. On a good day. Now I know that none of us is going to win a good citizenship award any time soon, but Haze is different. I talked to a pal of mine with some background in psychology, and he said that Haze displays many of the common symptoms of clinical sociopathy—lack of empathy or remorse for others, persistent, pathological manipulation and lying, poor self control, promiscuity, need for constant stimulation or a self-destructive need to experience new sensations, aggressive or violent behavior, poor or abusive relationships, glibness and superficial charm, desire to exert control over others, and the marked tendency to blame others or form rationalizations for unacceptable behaviors.

- Promiscuity? Seriously? Well color me a sociopath I guess. I just did a quick browse on this too, you know, and lots of these traits describe all of us. Like lack of realistic life plans, parasitic lifestyle, recurring difficulty with the law ...
- Kat o' Nine Tales
- But it's not one or two of these traits that earmarks someone as suffering (ironic quotation marks optional) from ASPD (Anti-Social Personality Disorder, not to be confused with APDS). It's the pervasive presence of all of them.
- Butch

What makes Haze dangerous is that he combines his sociopathic tendencies and Awakened abilities in a way that is unsettlingly synergistic. As you should have figured out from his posts here on JackPoint, Haze is an accomplished magician—a shaman. Specifically, he specializes in mental manipulation and mind control. Two years ago, while under the influence of tempo (against the advice of many of us), Haze was implicated in the sexual assault of a nineteen-year-old Salish brat, a diplomat's kid. I doubt this was the first time that Haze has played fast and loose with the whole concept of consent, and I'd be surprised if it was the last. None of Haze's victims have come forward, however, and that should be no surprise either. In addition to being able to control his targets' thoughts and emotions, Haze can also alter memory at will. This has kept him from paying for the consequences of his actions all these years.

- Damn, this is starting to piss me off. Is getting some action really that much worse a use of his talents than, I don't know, killing people? Like about half of us on here do on a regular basis?
- Riser
- Speak for yourself. Any crimes I commit target organizations—largely faceless, evil megacorporations—not individuals. And the same is true of lots of us here. We're not all as completely without scruples as your friend Haze.
- The Smiling Bandit
- And when we kill, we kill with a reason, often taking out people who are killers themselves. Most of us—those who have a soul, or at least a degree of caution—don't go taking out people we don't need to take out, or who don't have it coming. If Haze would restrict himself in that way, I don't think Pistons would have as much of a complaint.
- Aufheben

Haze—a male elf who never had a real SIN and who has done an admirable job of erasing every trace of his given name—was born in the Carbonado neighborhood of the Puyallup Barrens. His dad, a Chulo gangbanger and a Latino human, left the picture before he was born, and his mom, a Caucasian human, worked two jobs, as a waitress and as a nurse at a street clinic, to support them. His saintly ma also spent a lot of her time on her back getting plowed by the local Chulos for the

protection of herself and her baby. If this story sounds familiar to you, it's because Haze has been known to pull it out himself on occasion when playing the sympathy card.

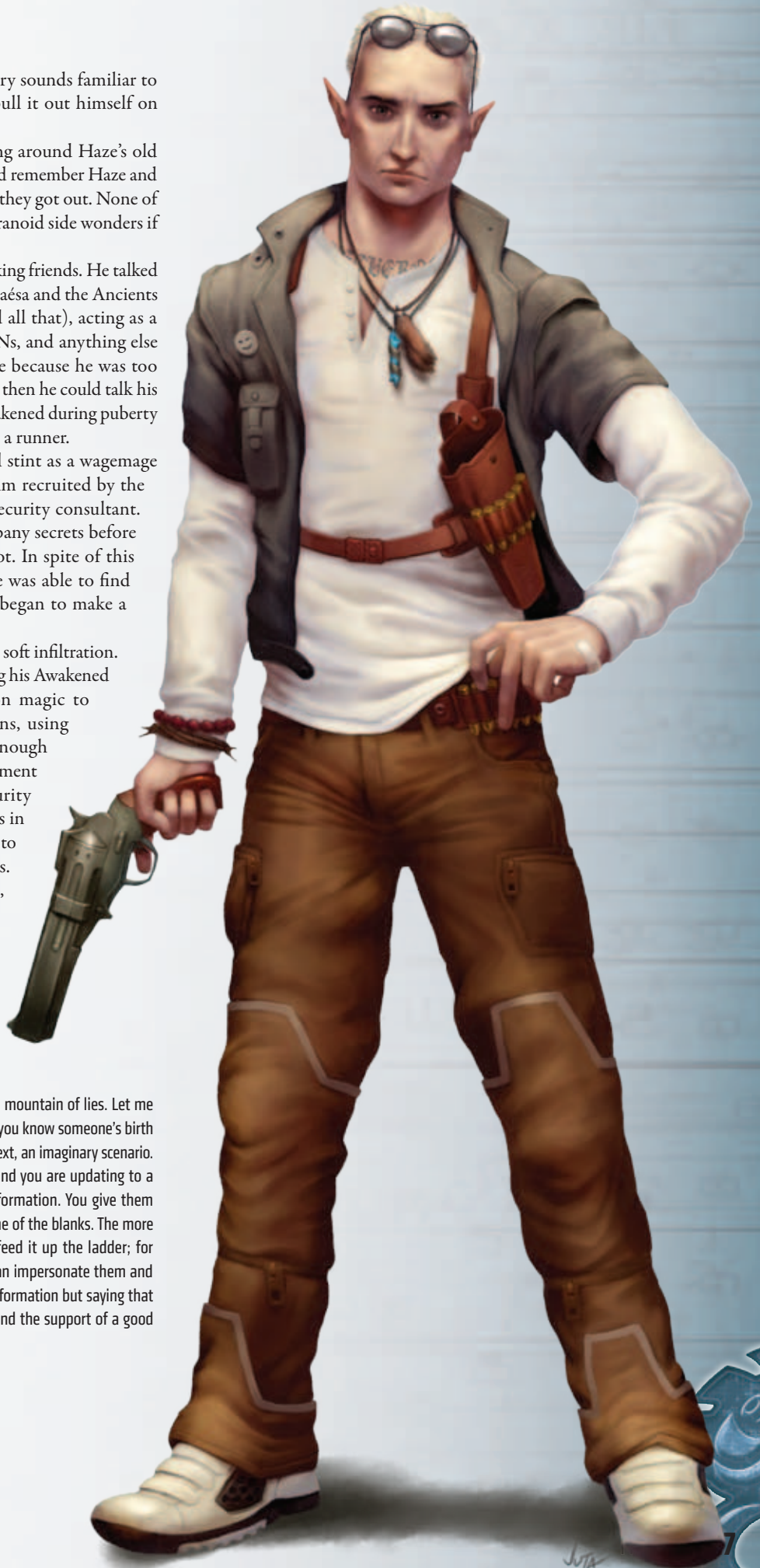
I checked out this sob story by snooping around Haze's old neighborhood. Folks around the neighborhood remember Haze and his ma with a certain degree of envy. After all, they got out. None of them, however, remembered his name. My paranoid side wonders if he made sure of that himself.

Even as a pre-teen, Haze had a gift for making friends. He talked his way into jobs as a package runner for the Laésa and the Ancients (because "we Elves gotta stick together" and all that), acting as a courier for BTLs, drugs, illicit arms, fake SINs, and anything else they needed to move. He made a good mule because he was too young to be tried as an adult, and because even then he could talk his way out of anything. But it wasn't until he Awakened during puberty that Haze moved up in the world and became a runner.

First, though, Haze had an unsuccessful stint as a wagemage in training. His contacts in the Laésa got him recruited by the Telestrian Industries offices in Seattle as a security consultant. Unfortunately, Haze got caught selling company secrets before he was even out of training and got the boot. In spite of this setback, Haze's talent was only growing. He was able to find more work through his local fixers, and he began to make a name for himself.

Haze is a master of social engineering and soft infiltration. A social chameleon accomplished at concealing his Awakened abilities, he uses illusion and manipulation magic to insert himself undetected into organizations, using mental influence spells when his lies aren't enough to earn the trust of his marks. The human element is the most vulnerable aspect of most security systems, and it is the one that Haze specializes in manipulating. He uses research and pretexting to establish legitimacy in the minds of his targets. As he exploits the cognitive bias this creates, he is able to talk almost anyone into divulging almost anything.

- Uh, I don't want to sound like a moron but, cognitive what now?
- Turbo Bunny
- Basically, you start with just a little bit of information on someone, and then you snowball it into a mountain of lies. Let me give you an old-fashioned example. For instance, say you know someone's birth date. Using that, you call them using an invented pretext, an imaginary scenario. You say that you work for their bank, for instance, and you are updating to a new filing system and you need to confirm their information. You give them the information you already have, and they fill in some of the blanks. The more trustworthy you sound, the easier it is. Then, you feed it up the ladder; for instance, if you can get their account number, you can impersonate them and place a call to the bank manager, giving all of their information but saying that you've forgotten your PIN number. Now add magic and the support of a good hacker, and the possibilities are endless.
- Dr. Spin
- It's basically in-person phishing.
- Glitch



I found a typical rundown of one of his jobs copied over from a five-year-old ShadowSea post put up by one of his guys who was unwisely bragging. In this particular instance, Haze had been hired by a mid-ranking Yakuza to recover a load of BTLs (mostly CalHots and Kong chips) he'd accidentally let fall into Lone Star's hands. Speed was important—the Yak wanted the chips back before anyone above him found out (and he had to cut off a finger, or worse, by way of atonement). The chips were in the local precinct evidence lockup, and they were slated to be transferred by an armored car to an evidence warehouse that might best be described as an impenetrable fortress. So what Haze did was have part of his team make sure that the armored transport didn't arrive at the precinct on time. Then he and his crew showed up at the precinct office, dressed as cops and driving an Ares Roadmaster. Magic and bald-faced lies took care of the rest. The Star loaded the BTLs into the van for them, and once the RFID tags were all burned, Haze and his team got to keep all of the extra evidence as a bonus.

It was pulling jobs like this that got Haze from the gutters to the shadows and bought his beloved mother a nice condo in Snohomish. From that, of course, it may not be clear why Haze is a bad person. Why what he does is any worse than what we all do; why I have the gall to take the moral high ground at all. So for that, I need to trot out the sad, sad story of Giselle Harris.

- You're going there? Did you really think I wouldn't read this? Do you really think there won't be consequences?
- Haze

Take this familiar scenario: A big corporation—maybe an AAA, maybe an AA—wants to buy out a small company—maybe A-rated, maybe unrated—as cheaply as possible, perhaps because the smaller company has a prototype or some talent that the big corporation wants. It's the kind of run that can be done a thousand ways, and we've all done things like it. But Haze's approach in one particular instance was, I hope, unique. Haze wanted access to the small company's president to convince him to sell. Unfortunately, the president was quite well guarded at work, at home, and in between. So Haze went for the next best thing, the president's personal secretary, a pretty 23-year-old dwarf named Giselle Harris.

With social networking being what it is in this day and age, the Matrix made it child's play for Haze to find Ms. Harris' favorite nightspots. His natural good looks and his magical abilities made it easy for him to seduce her. And she had no way to defend herself against his spells. Even if she had known what he was up to, she might not have minded, because Giselle was head over heels in love. So, Haze arranged for Giselle to report all of her bosses' conversations to him through secure channels. All of them. Unfortunately, the president of the small company was having an affair with a male troll—a piece of information that Haze correctly figured he wouldn't want getting out to his wife and two children. Armed with such excellent blackmail fodder, it wasn't hard for Haze's team to convince the president to sell out his company, and Haze collected his percentage.

What about Giselle Harris? Well, it wasn't hard for corp internal affairs to trace the leaked information back to her, so during the restructuring of the company after the buyout, she

was fired, with assurances that she'd never work again. That wasn't enough for Haze, though. He had to be sure he and his team were protected. So he went back and erased all of her memories of what had happened. It must not have taken all the way, though. What Giselle could remember, perhaps just subconsciously, was that there was a man she had loved, a man who had been cruel to her, and who had vanished. She couldn't remember how she had lost her job, or how her life had been destroyed.

She became a mostly empty shell holding nothing but vague, sad memories, so her actions aren't too hard to predict. She wound up taking her own life, stepping off of the 10th Street monorail platform directly in front of a speeding train. I know that some of you may have had occasion to take an innocent life in your line of work. I know I have. But this was different. I don't know any other words to use for it than mind rape. It would have been kinder, almost, if he'd merely killed her.

- Mind rape? Seriously? You do realize that it's this kind of thinking that has been fueling the fires of paranoia and prejudice that the Awakened have had to deal with for decades, right?
- Winterhawk
- Hey, it's not me giving you a bad name. It's him.
- Pistons
- Something's bothering me, Pistons. How could you possibly know all of this? Is there something you're not telling us?
- Marcos
- I happen to know that Mr. and Mrs. Harris scraped together what little they had to hire some shadowrunners to look into their only daughter's suicide back when all of this went down. Pistons must have gone to the trouble of finding them.
- Sunshine

Haze quickly gained a reputation as the man with the plan for his ability to execute cons and grifts. A crew of other up-and-coming runners formed around him. He branched out a bit, capitalizing on his knack for learning things he was never supposed to know, becoming a freelance information broker. Although he's quite young for it—my best guess indicates Haze will turn 33 later this year, give or take a year or three—Haze also was working as a small-time fixer in Seattle before he was forced to leave, acquiring and shaping a stable of street talent in and around the Puyallup barrens.

In 2071, while his star was rising, Haze made the biggest mistake of his life and began using tempo. I don't need to tell you all about this part—I think it's fresh enough in our memories. He rationalized that the drug gave him an edge to make him a more efficient runner, especially when negotiating with Mr. Johnsons and making contacts. In reality, it became a crutch, and he became an addict. It was under the influence of tempo that he as-good-as-raped Mikayah Lakesong. And it was tempo that the First Nations were pushing when he got involved with them. Even if he didn't pull the trigger himself on Fatima when she was trying to find out the source of the poison they were peddling and got caught between them and the Ragers, he was there, his buddies lit her up, and he did nothing to stop

it. Haze was never a great guy, but tempo made him an addict, caught in a downward spiral with no concern for who he took with him, even someone with more humanity, more decency, in her little finger than Haze had in his entire body.

And for that, I will never, ever forgive him.

- *Y regreso aqui otra vez y comienzo.* What you will never, ever forgive me for is something I did not do. Your crusade is misguided and pointless, and I can promise it won't end well for you. As for the addiction you keep going on about, it's no secret I've been clean for months.
- Haze
- I hate to break it to you, Haze, but I've known alcoholics who have backslid further than ever after years or even *decades* on the wagon. And then there's *tempo*. We're still just figuring out all the ways that shit can fuck you up. Addiction is like the Mafia; once you're in, it's for life.
- Hard Exit

Because Lakesong was the daughter of a diplomatic attaché from the Salish-Shidhe tribal lands, Haze wound up a person of interest in an ongoing investigation, and he is still wanted by both Salish authorities and Lone Star. If any of you have a sideline as a bounty hunter or skiptracer, you've probably seen a pretty large price on his head. He fled from Seattle to Hong Kong at first, taking his information-broker business with him but leaving behind his team as well as temporarily sidelining his dreams of becoming a fixer.

Since then, he's been flitting around the globe, staying one step ahead of authorities. My sources tell me he's been sighted all over in the past year or so, from the Athabaskan lands, Bogotá, and Yokohama to Manhattan and LA. He's done work for the Yakuza, the Ancients, the Koshari, and more.

I can't tell you what actions your conscience should dictate, nor will I link you to one of the open bounties offered on his head. It's certainly not my place to pass the judgment that Haze should be killed or imprisoned, even if he is the worst sort of rapist scum and has gotten away with it for decades. It's enough for me that you all now know who your colleague really is.

- Pistons, I've held my tongue through this whole article, but I think you're really out of line here. I know that Fatima was important to you, even more than most of us. But Haze is off of the flipside and back to his old self again. He has been for some time, and he still swears he had nothing to do with it. How long are you going to hold this grudge? This kind of telling tales out of school can really hurt your rep. How are the rest of us supposed to trust you with our secrets now?
- Nephine
- Sure, Neph, you think Haze is a great guy. But do you ever stop to think if those are really your own thoughts you're thinking, or ones he put there? I don't know how you'd ever know until it was too late.
- Pistons

HAZE

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **M** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
 3 4(5) 4 2(3) 6(7) 4 3 4 6(7) 6(7) 4 5 8

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 11/6

Skills: Assensing (Aura Reading) 2 (+2), Blades 2, Conjuring skill group 4, Counterspelling 4, Dodge (Ranged) 2 (+2), Influence skill group 5 (7), Perception 3 (6), Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols (Revolvers) 3 (+2), Ritual Spellcasting (Manipulation) 3 (+2), Spellcasting (Manipulation) 5 (+2), Stealth skill group 3

Knowledge Skills: Club Music 3, Gang Identification 3, Police Procedures 3, Seattle Sprawl 3, Security Design 3, Street Drugs 3, City Speak 3, English N, Spanish 3, Sperethiel 3

Qualities: Allergy (Cold Iron, Moderate), Bad Rep, First Impression, Geas (Ritual), Low Pain Tolerance, Magician, Mentor Spirit (Trickster).

Initiate Grade: 2

Metamagics: Masking, quickening

Spells: Alter Memory, Armor, Bugs, Chaotic World, Control Thoughts, Hot Potato, Improved Invisibility, Increase Reflexes, Influence, Physical Mask, Stunball, Stunbolt.

Augmentations: Muscle Replacement (Rating 1, Betaware), Cat's Eyes, Sleep Regulator, Tailored Pheromones (Rating 1).

Gear: Autopicker (Rating 6), contacts [Rating 3 w/ image link, smartlink, and vision enhancement (Rating 3)], crystal prism on a fine silver chain (Force 2 manipulation spellcasting focus), fake SIN [Rating 4 w/ Rating 4 fake spellcasting and concealed-carry licenses], FFBA shirt, lined coat [w/ nonconductivity (Rating 6) and Chemical Protection (Rating 6)], Indian Pathfinder racing bike, lucky rabbit's foot (Force 1 Power Focus), maglock passkey (Rating 3), Novatech Airware commlink [Response 3, Signal 3, Firewall 2, System 3 w/ subvocal microphone and trodes], 10 doses psyche, respirator (Rating 6), 20 RFID sensor tags (Rating 1 Microphone), 20 RFID sensor tags (Rating 1 Camera), 5 x stimulant patches (Rating 5), SecureTech PPP [Leg and Arm Casings, Vitals Protector].

Weapons:

Cavalier Deputy [Heavy Pistol, DV 6P, AP -2, SA, RC 1, 7(cy), w/ personalized grip, quick draw holster, smartgun and EX Explosive Ammo]

Cougar Fineblade knife, short blade [Knife, Reach 0, DV 3P, AP -1 w/ personalized grip]

KELLAN COLT

POSTED BY: LOTHAN

VITAL STATS: KELLAN COLT

Age: 27 **Height:** 1.68 m
Weight: 55.4 kg **Hair:** Blonde
Eyes: Blue **Gender:** Female
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** Yes
 (Hermetic mage)

- I thought it would be good to include the profile of a relatively young runner who has made a nice rise through the ranks, and there really was only one person appropriate to tell us her story. So JackPoint, meet Lothan.
- Fastjack

All right, little girl, I hope you appreciate this. Don't let your head swell up—it'll just make it an even bigger target. For all the times you've saved my hide I'm happy to put out some kind words about you. I was asked who was the best in the business these days is, and while you might not be there quite yet, I think you may very well be on your way.

First a little background. Second-generation runners aren't that hard to find. They tend to travel one of two paths—they either follow their parents' path to lawlessness (usually while keeping the fact that they're doing so hidden); or they fight to be nothing like their parents, working to overcome the twin influences of nature and nurture. Kellan Colt is the daughter of a pair of runners, and she took the former path, trailing her parents right into the shadows. She got her father's magical talent and her mother's running savvy, while adding a few ingredients of her own to the mix.

Kellan entered the shadows when she was seventeen years old, that magical time in people's lives when they know everything because they have experienced nothing. Her rookie work was done in the deadly (ha!) shadows of Kansas City. She stepped up to the big leagues in Seattle when she came to town looking to track down a mysterious package from her mother that contained an amulet. Her early success was less a measure of her skills and more the patience of the team she got involved with, which included me, her arcane mentor, Lothan.

Kellan's early runs were typical: extractions, data steals, protection jobs, etc. The majority of the runs went as planned, and any complications were handled by the skill and professionalism of my team. Kellan's youthful zest (read: impatience) was a constant source of contention between her and me. We may have both cast spells and conjured spirits, but that was where the similarities ended. I'm a planner, while Kellan is more the quick-action type. During her early work with my team she was made very aware of her place,

and I could tell she resented that fact. As most youths do, she eventually got sick of working in the shadow of her mentor and stepped out on her own.

The first run she planned on her own was a disaster. She was young and too easily lured by the promise of the ever-elusive "big score." Even though she had spent only a little time in the shadows of Seattle, she went international, traveling to the nearby Salish-Shidhe Council to look for a forgotten cache of weapons from the old days of the United States. It turned out there was no cache, and Kellan got a crash course in dealing with toxic magic.

- "Crash" being the key word here. Kellan and company headed into the NAN expecting easy money and a big payday. They got into an old abandoned U.S. military facility, thinking they were making good progress, only to discover that they were suffering minor radiation sickness. Seems the U.S. left a little something behind in the form of radioactive waste. Things went from bad to worse when they met a toxic shaman named Zhade and his hangers-on. It took a struggle, but Kellan and company were able to put the toxic in the ground and then get their asses out without being buried by the worst of the waste in the area. Kellan herself will tell you it was luck, not skill, that got her out of there.
- Pistons

Kellan escaped from that gig by the skin of her teeth and came out with a much greater understanding of the dark corners of the world, those places that make our shadows look like high noon in the desert. In her case a little wisdom went a long way. She got better at her job pretty quickly. I have a personal bias, but I really think she's one of the quickest learners out there. Her biggest problem is she seems to only learn from her own mistakes, not from anyone else's.

She really came into her own when facing down some dreck that had started back in her mom's day. The package Kellan had come to Seattle to investigate contained a rather unusual amulet, which had connections to a free spirit that nearly killed her. This was when she fully realized the value of having a team you can trust and call "friends" instead of just teammates. Her experience with that little trinket did a lot to shape her future. She's become a well-respected expert in identifying arcane objects, both modern and ancient. That amulet was lost, but Kellan fashioned a new focus with a similar form that still hangs around her neck as a reminder of the power of some of the objects she's been in contact with over the last half-dozen years or so.

- Friends are overrated. Contacts and business acquaintances, on the other hand, I'll take in droves.
- Riser
- Different strokes for different folks. Personally, I think being friends with your team has pros and cons. You can trust friends, and you know they will have your back, but when a friend takes a bullet, rational thought is often overwhelmed by rampant stupidity. That's a personal opinion. Fact of the

matter is, Colt's lost two friends in the last decade and she didn't lose her cool in either case. Neither one's death went unanswered—one killer is rotting in jail, and the other is at the bottom of the Sound—but in both cases Colt's response was calm, measured, and delivered cold.

- Bull

In the last decade Kellan has transcended her callow beginnings and matured into one of the premier runners in the American shadow community. She and her team have done work everywhere from AMC to Paraguay. The majority of the contracts have been in three categories: extractions, protection jobs, and arcane artifact acquisition and retrieval. She's been able to keep personnel turnover low and survivability high—the team has had only nine members over the past ten years. With the experience they have had working together, they are well worth the price they charge, and I'm not just saying that because I get a cut.

Kellan and company have seen a lot of action during the past few years. When tempo made the streets go FUBAR, Kellan got pulled in deep with a personal connection. Orion, one of our initial teammates, was in a party phase, and he gave the drug a try. The hooks sank quick and deep. Orion started losing time and acting erratically; he even attacked Kellan at one point. It was an ugly fight, and it cost Orion both his arms. I have the footage from some nearby security cams if anyone wants to see Kellan in action.

After that little altercation, Kellan did what any good friend would do when a bio-Awakened drug has your friend hooked—she started digging and didn't stop. I'm sure a lot of this was motivated by the guilt she felt after the fight, but she put her heart and soul into helping out her friend. She dug far enough to find the truth behind tempo. Two months in the Central and South American jungle uncovered the connection to shadow-spirit-possessed trees. The girl's skills and creativity helped her put together a unique ritual healing spell that combined aspects of both healing magic and banishing techniques. The ritual cleaned up Orion pretty quick, but there was still the question of permanent physical damage. Our badass adept was two arms shy of a full body. Between the tempo and the injuries, he was well down burnout road, so he had no problem with getting a pair of metal replacements, which Kellan bought for him.

- This is the flipside of Riser's policy on friends. If you don't have friends, you don't have people who will go to these lengths for you. Though of course this point loses some steam if we focus on the fact that Kellan was the one who cost him his arms in the first place.
- Netcat

Since her fight with Orion, Kellan has developed a solid reputation for being able to put together new and interesting spell formulae and set up some rituals others would think are completely ludicrous. If you need something done with magic and you aren't quite sure how to do it, or even if it's possible, she's your girl. This particular gift is a prime reason why I consider her to be one of the best in the business. She's written some spells that are blindingly powerful, and yet most of them she can't cast. For virtually all the spells she's made on contract, she's signed an agreement limiting the spell to the sole knowledge of



the purchaser. And she keeps her word. No double-crosses, no back-door sales, no lies. She's a pro.

The experience Kellan's team had in the jungle gave them enough cred to get hired for more work down in Aztlan and Amazonia as well as in Paraguay, Chile, and Peru. There is not as much call for Kellan's kind of work down there ever since the war flared up, since they are not a mercenary unit and they stick out like a sore thumb (or, well, like a team of gringos in Central America). On the upside, a recent increase in shadow activity around Seattle, Atlanta, and Africa, all revolving around magical artifacts some believe are from a previous age of magic, has kept her and her team busy. Rumors from down south also have some arcanarchaeological sites popping up in South America in spots far from the fighting.

Now, to clear the air, I've heard the latest street talk about some artifact she got her hands on that works for anyone, and I'm here to say it's total drek. The item only works for anyone with spellcasting ability. And on top of that the piece is some sort of artifact, not a recent creation. She came across "the tube," as I call it, during an, ahem, "unsanctioned property transference." The item was part of a collection of pieces being sent to the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Tenochtitlán that Kellan was hired to intercept. The Johnson in charge of the job wanted one particular item, some oddly shaped idol that Kellan said gave her the creeps, and she was then allowed to take some of her payment in the form of other items in the collection. Half the stuff was junk, pretty ancient junk, but still junk; Kellan's eye was sharp enough to pick out the one item that was truly worthwhile.

It turned out that the hard part of the job was holding on to the thing. Right after Kellan got her hands on "the tube," she called me to her doss downtown. And the place got blasted. Nobody was inside at the time—we'd just slipped out the back to get some dinner. KE vacillated between calling it a bomb or a gas leak, so we performed our own investigation. Now, Kellan, she's got an astral eye for foci and objects of power, but me, I like to read the history of a spot. She saw some mojo in the air, maybe a spark that set off the gas. I took a deeper look and got a real good idea of who may have been behind the explosion. The spell signature stank of sacrifice magic. The end result was, not forty-eight hours after the grab, we had Azzies hot on our trail.

So with the Azzies closing on us and obviously interested in the items Kellan had just obtained, she made what I thought was a brilliant move. She took pictures of all the pieces, dropped a series of wards on an old chest with the pieces inside, and sent the "treasure chest" to the bottom of Lake Union with a small army of water spirits to guard it. With the items safely hidden away, she headed to the Seattle Pyramid and walked in like she owned the place. She set up a meeting with one of the in-house Mr. Johnsons and told them how things were going to go down. She would give back the items, and they would leave her and her team alone. Mr. Johnson spent a few moments on big talk about how he didn't need to negotiate, but he eventually gave in. Turned out, though, that she didn't drop everything in the chest. She held out "the tube" and a powerful spell focus, then sold the focus and kept "the tube." The rest of the team got paid in cash, and she took "the tube" as her cut.

- So you're telling us she walked into the Seattle HQ of Aztechnology as a wanted woman, talked to somebody about giving them their property back, and then walked out the victor. And you are announcing this on our little forum here with some people who are not as scrupulous as Miss Colt. Ballsy.
- Haze

- Aztechnology is a corporation, and though we may have our thoughts of revenge and honor, they think only of the bottom line. Obviously Kellan made them a good offer and they took it rather than lose the whole lot of their goods. Simple economics—some money is better than no money.
- Marcos

We've studied "the tube" (and by that I mean I helped ward a room so she could study it), and it has some unique properties. After a little attuning I could use it, she could use it as a focus, though some adept acquaintances of ours could not. None of our mundane team members could use it, no matter how long they stared at it or how hard they grunted while it was in their hands.

After the deal with the Azzies and the work she's done on research for "the tube" (I really need a better name for it), Kellan is obviously ready to expand into some other markets. She has a solid reputation in the shadows for her work with the magical community for her spell design, but I think the next place she may be headed is into artifact identification. She has a good team that can help her obtain said artifacts and keep hold of them long enough to research them. She'll need some new tactics, though—I don't think the toss-it-in-the-lake-and-negotiate method will work too many more times.

- It didn't even work that first time. I'm afraid Lothan's information about Kellan only having nine team members in ten years is no longer accurate. Breaking news: AZT just came down on them like a hammer on a gumball. Kellan's in hiding, and some, possibly all, of her other team members are dead. Lothan, I'd get yourself someplace safe if I were you.
- Sunshine
- Big corps like the bottom line, but they also understand the economic value of revenge. Sometimes you have to send a message, loud and clear, that you are not to be screwed with. Aztechnology is inordinately fond of sending that message whenever they feel it's necessary.
- Cosmo

Kellan's got a sharp mind, keen guts, and a good heart. She knows her way around the shadow community and has done and seen a lot to survive in it for nearly a decade. She knows just how to utilize her instincts and her skills, she's a solid mage, a smart leader, calm under pressure, and a great leader. I'm glad she's made it to the big leagues.

- Big enough to be personally targeted by the Big A! We'll see how she regroup—assuming she lives long enough.
- Picador

KELLAN COLT

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
5	5	5	3	5	5	4	5	7	6	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11

Armor (B/I): 6/4

Skills: Arcana (Ritual Spell formulae) 7 (+2), Assensing (Foci) 4 (+2), Astral Combat 4, Athletics skill group 4, Banishing 5, Binding 2, Blades (Sword) 4 (+2), Clubs 3, Computers 2, Con 2, Counterspelling 5, Data Search 2, Demolitions 1, Dodge 4, Enchanting 2, Etiquette (Street) 4, Firearms skill group 4, First Aid 3, Hardware 1, Infiltration 4, Intimidation 3, Instruction 3, Leadership 6, Navigation 3, Negotiation 3, Parachuting 2, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pilot Watercraft 2, Ritual Spellcasting 4, Shadowing 4, Spellcasting (Combat) 6 (+2), Summoning 5, Survival 2, Throwing Weapons 3, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Ancient Civilizations 4, Ancient Mythology 4, Ancient Texts 4, Arcanoarchaeology 5, Atlanta Streets 2, Atlantean Myths 4, Dragons (Great) 4 (+2), Kansas City Streets 4, Magical Groups 4, Magical Politics 4, Magical Theory 5, Seattle Politics 2, Seattle Street Gangs (Redmond) 3 (+2), Spirits 3, Arabic 3, Aramaic 3, Egyptian Heiroglyphs 3, English N, Esperanta 3, Latin 3, Or'zet 2, Sanskrit 4, Sperethiel 2

Qualities: Magician, Aptitude (Arcana), Enemy, Will to Live 3, High Pain Tolerance 3

Initiate Grade: 3

Metamagics: Cleansing, masking, shielding

Spells: Alter Memory, Analyze Magic, Astral Window, Awaken, Detect Enemies (Extended), Detect Magic, Detox, Heal, Ice Sheet, Mind Probe, Oxygenate, Spirit Barrier, Stunball, Stunbolt, Translate

Bound Spirits: 2 x spirits of air (Force 4, 2 services), spirit of earth (Force 4, 3 services), spirit of fire (Force 4, 1 service), spirit of water (Force 6, 4 services)

Gear: 80 rounds of ex-explosive ammo, 100 rounds gel ammo, 200 rounds of regular ammo, 100 rounds of stick-n-shock ammo, 2 x area jammers (Rating 4), armor vest (6/4,

nonconductivity 4), climbing gear set, commlink (Device Rating 5), contacts (smartlink, low-light), 50 datachips, directional jammer (Rating 4), earbuds [Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement (Rating 3), select sound filter (Rating 3)], electronic binoculars [Rating 2, w/ low-light, vision enhancement (Rating 2)], fake gun license (Rating 3), fake SIN (Rating 3), focus (Summoning Force 4, Power Force 2), glasses [Rating 4, w/ low-light, thermographic, and vision magnification], 2 grapple guns, handheld sensor with cyberware scanner (Rating 5) & MAD scanner (Rating 3), handheld sensor with directional microphone and laser microphone (Rating 6), laser microphone (Rating 4), medkit (Rating 4), 6 x micro camera [Rating 6, w/ low-light], micro microphone [Rating 6, w/ select sound filter (Rating 3)], microphone (Rating 6, w/ audio enhancement (Rating 3), select sound filter (Rating 3)), 2 x micro-transceivers (Rating 6), 5 x nanopaste disguise (small containers), 2 x radio signal scanner (Rating 6), rappelling gloves, respirator (Rating 4), 20 standard RFID tags (Rating 1), 100 stealth RFID tags, 400 meters of stealth rope w/ catalyst stick, sustaining foci (2 x Force 3, 2 x Force 4), 2 tag erasers, white noise generator (Rating 6), 2 wire clippers

Programs: Analyze 3, Browse 3, Command 2, Edit 2

Weapons:

Ares Predator IV [Heavy Pistol, DV 6S(e), AP Impact (-half), SA, RC -1, 15(c), w/ personalized grip, smartgun and stick-n-shock ammo]

AZ-150 Stun Baton [Club, Reach 1, DV 7S(c), AP -half]

Colt M23 [Assault Rifle, DV 7P, AP -2, SA/BF/FA, RC 5 (6), 40(c), w/ auto-adjusting underbarrel weight, gas-vent 3, personalized grip, smartgun, and ex-ex ammo]

Katana [Blade, Reach 1, DV 5P, AP -1]

Survival Knife [Blade, Reach 0, DV 3P, AP -1, forearm sheath]

6 Flash Bang Grenades [Grenade, DV 6S, AP -3, Blast 10m radius]

4 Frag Grenades [Grenade, DV 12P(f), AP +5, Blast -1/m]

4 High Explosive Grenades [Grenade, DV 10P, AP -2, Blast -2/m]

MA'FAN

POSTED BY: MIKA

VITAL STATS: MA'FAN

Age: 29	Height: 1.57 m
Weight: Unknown	Hair: Changes with the job (primarily black)
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Female
Metatype: Human	Awakened: Yes (Adept)

For the megacorporations and the various security firms around the world whose paths she has crossed in her illustrious career, the woman behind the street name “Ma’Fan” (Mandarin for “Trouble”) is elusive to the point of being untouchable by her many enemies. This alone makes her quite infuriating.

Ma’Fan is obsessed with minimizing and eliminating her datatrails in whichever city she plans to pull a job, leaving only the smallest possible footprint for anyone to find (and I should know—I have spent countless hours trying to track her down after she’s beaten me to a big score, only to be frustrated when she vanishes off the grid like a ghost). Ma’Fan is meticulous in planning a job, sometimes taking days or even weeks to case a museum or an exhibit before making a move to obtain the object of her most recent obsession. In many ways, Ma’Fan is very “old school” in her techniques. She leaves virtually no trace of her entry or exit points at many of the museums that she hits, and she is extremely cautious about her jobs so that if she needs to hit the same target again, there is a very good chance that at least some of the security vulnerabilities she exploited the first time will still be intact for her to exploit again. It often takes several hours before the objects that she steals are reported missing by security, generally because she leaves behind sophisticated forgeries in their place. By the time the forgery is detected, Ma’Fan has already made a clean getaway.

No matter what sophisticated security measures or deterrents are in place, Ma’Fan seems capable of defeating them all with her delicate touch and her graceful movements, all without the aid of the sophisticated, state-of-the-art technology available to B&E specialists. Ma’Fan routinely bypasses advanced technological security measures with her own jury-rigged solutions. I have heard stories about her using things like bubble gum, aluminum foil, mirrors, and ball bearings. Despite how low-tech some of her solutions might appear to be at a glance, her success speaks volumes for her technique and her skill.

- I make all these preparations to minimize the chances of things going wrong. And when they do, there’s a chance of me still walking away from the clusterfuck—like when my harness failed and I broke my leg on a recent run. Had I not planned as well as I did, and not had a contingency plan in place, I would have certainly been caught that night.
- Ma’Fan
- There’s also something to be said for working in teams, dear.
- Pistons
- The bigger the team, the less the profit. That’s one of the reasons I mainly work alone. I have a big problem with sharing. That and most people don’t want to work around me, afraid of my “curse” with technology. That’s how I got the name of “Ma’Fan” to begin with. People consider me to be trouble when technology is involved. Of course, I’ve proven on more than one occasion that I am stronger for not having to rely on technology as much as some people (I’m looking at you, here, Mika).
- Ma’Fan
- Ah, there’s the sniping I’ve been waiting for. The Mika-saying-nice-things-about-Ma’Fan stuff had me a little disoriented.
- Sunshine

Despite her inexplicable incompatibility with technology and her deep mistrust of it, Ma’Fan invests in dozens of fake SINS, licenses, and travel documents, which she uses as an effective misdirection to conceal her departure (and her intended destination) from any given city or country with her purloined treasures. Ma’Fan’s antics often leave her rivals feeling as though she is toying with them. Ma’Fan usually has at least three escape routes planned so that she can escape safely into the shadows, even if things should go sideways. On any given job, Ma’Fan typically burns through a half-dozen or so fake identities, even on jobs where most shadowrunners would use only one or two fakes. Over the years, I have learned more than a few of her whimsical identities: Celina C. Kyle (yes, I rolled my eyes on that one too), Tabitha Lynx, Amanda Aegean, Catherine Chausie, Emuishere Mau, Xian Korat, and Rebecca Manx. All of these, of course, refer to cats in one way or another, to cats; a fascination of hers that could become a potentially dangerous signature in her line of work. Ma’Fan is an adept, and she uses her enhanced abilities in her “asset acquisitions” as a cat burglar. She follows the mentor spirit identified as “Cat,” though I have always found it to be a bizarre concept for an adept to follow a magical custom that is generally only practiced by the spellslingers. From what I have heard on the streets, one cat in particular accompanies her wherever she travels: a white cat with an orange-and-brown ringed tail and green eyes.

As she travels the globe lifting various rare items from their current homes, Ma'Fan manages to stay far ahead of the authorities pursuing her. The closest Ma'Fan has come to being arrested by Interpol (or any other international law enforcement agency) was in April 2067, in Barcelona. An Interpol agent by the name of Estaban Blanco had apprehended and flipped one of her contacts (a trusted forger, as I recall) to set up a sting for Ma'Fan. The only thing that prevented Ma'Fan from being caught was the fact that the vehicle that she was using at the time broke down on the wrong side of Barcelona, which made her nearly ninety minutes late for the meet. By that time, Agent Blanco had blown his surveillance of the contact, assuming that Ma'Fan had somehow been tipped off to the sting operation and had moved on. Blanco chose to make the big collar on Ma'Fan's contact instead, leaving her free to continue her career and occasionally annoy those of us who encounter her.

- Had Blanco been more patient, he would have busted me when I was carrying close to a million nuyen in uncut diamonds and four stolen paintings from very prominent Spanish museums. It was a pretty big haul for me back in the day, and one that would have gotten me a very lengthy prison sentence from the courts in Spain. If that had happened, my friend, you and I wouldn't have shared the amazing adventures that we have enjoyed over the years.
- Ma'Fan
- I wouldn't call our "cat-and-mouse" encounters "adventures." Or enjoyable. Only harrowing, especially when I had to report back to my Mr. Johnson that you made away with his (or her) desired object. Your interference has almost gotten me killed on more than a couple of occasions.
- Mika
- And your interference has also done the same thing to me. So stop complaining about spilt soy milk. In this regard, we're pretty much even.
- Ma'Fan

Accurate details about Ma'Fan's real identity are difficult to come by. I suspect either Ma'Fan or one of her many contacts erased most of her previous identity. What was left may have been inadvertently damaged or altered by Crash 2.0. A few details about a young woman whom I believe to be Ma'Fan seem to fit with what I know of her personality and physical features, but they could just as easily have been spoofed from another woman's criminal record (something I suspect the real Ma'Fan is very likely to have had done). From what I have been able to construct about her mysterious past, Ma'Fan's real name was Yuan Lai, and she grew up on the streets of Shanghai. She entered the police system in 2055, listed as SINless, at the age of 11. She established for herself a rap sheet of petty thefts (mostly stealing corporate pocket secretaries, optical data chips, and certified credsticks) for a local street gang. But since she was never caught with any of the items that she had allegedly stolen, and none of those items were ever recovered, a vast majority of the charges against her were dismissed for lack of evidence, and most of the remaining charges that actually stuck to her ended up being mere slaps on the wrist. Many surveillance teams from local security firms were sent out to keep track of this troublesome woman, waiting for her to screw up so that



they could finally throw her into prison on charges that would stick. Even at that young age, Yuan Lai proved evasive and consistently eluded those agents who were tasked with keeping tabs on her. She soon developed a reputation for being able to get in and out of tight spots with ease, due in part to her talents for improvisation. Eventually, the local Shanghai police gave up trying to keep track of her.

- There's another reason to doubt that the file for Yuan Lai is actually Ma'Fan. I've looked into it, and according to the records, there were at least six counts of soliciting prostitution. Somehow, I don't think that's a profession that Ma'Fan would ever engage in.
- DangerSensei
- Oh, I don't know. Posing as a joy girl can provide one with useful access to things that could get you into a facility undetected; things such as DNA samples, retinal scans, and commlink access. Ma'Fan strikes me as a professional who would not be above taking that approach, if it meant obtaining the item that she was after with as few complications as possible.
- Pistons
- But if it was her, would she have been caught and charged in the first place? Especially later on in her career? I still have my doubts.
- DangerSensei

She worked with a local street gang for a few years. They would have introduced Yuan Lai to the Red Dragon Triad, who could have provided formal training on how to infiltrate locations with more sophisticated security measures than she was used to on the streets. Under what appears to be the Triad's guidance and funding, Yuan Lai graduated from a local high school and attended the Shanghai Jiao Tong University for three years. She majored in Art History and minored in Electrical Engineering. Much of her Electrical Engineering training dealt with the functions and the designs of modern maglocks. Yuan Lai was in her fourth year of college when she mysteriously disappeared in early 2065. It was around that time that the mysterious Ma'Fan began making appearances in and around Shanghai, and wherever she surfaced, famous art and sculptures disappeared.

If Yuan Lai is truly Ma'Fan, she seems to have spent a year perfecting her techniques on the museums of Shanghai—from the Shanghai Museum, where she stole stone seals belonging to Wen Peng and He Zhen, to the C.Y. Tung Maritime Museum, where she is believed to have stolen artifacts salvaged from wreck of a 15th-century merchant ship. It is widely believed that Lai stole up to fifteen million nuyen worth of artifacts, sculptures, and artwork over that one-year period. By the middle of 2066, she had graduated from Shanghai museums to the international art world, appearing in Manhattan, Cairo, Rome, Madrid, Moscow, Kuala Lumpur, London, Paris, and Barcelona.

My first personal encounter with Ma'Fan happened on November 3, 2066, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. I was breaking into a display case on the second floor when my commlink alerted me to movement inside the exhibit hall above me—barely enough to register on the motion sensors. It could have been nothing more than a rodent, but I was in a precarious situation and had to be sure the guards weren't about to catch me in a random sweep of the museum. So I back-traced

and accounted for all the known factors—guards, maintenance crews, and drones—then I checked the feeds in the security office to see what the supervisors were saying about this anomaly. All three were slumped over in their chairs, unconscious.

When I checked back to the exhibit hall where the alert came from, I noticed that whoever broke in there was skilled at avoiding the cameras, remaining either in the shadows or just out of frame. I also found that the individual in question had shifted two of the cameras in the exhibit hall, creating a blind spot for a specific art piece, *Ghost Dance Justice*. By then I had already acquired what I came for and could have left at any time, but I was intrigued as to who this new thief might be and just how good they were. If I were more militant about preserving the history of my own culture, I might have been more upset that whoever was on the third floor was stealing a piece of artwork created by a Sioux survivor of the old United States re-education centers. But my practical side knew the considerable street value of that piece, and knew that it was a wise choice for the thief and/or their employer. And as an art thief, I respected their good taste.

I spent more time than usual checking camera feeds leading out of the exhibit hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the particular thief. After several minutes of chasing shadows, I finally caught a brief shot of the woman leaving through an air duct (an air duct with motion sensors that had conveniently stopped reporting motion at that moment). During the second or two she faced a camera, I noticed she bore a striking resemblance to a female guard currently on duty who was currently making her rounds in the basement. Whoever it was, she was skilled enough to steal the face of a current guard, either through technological or magical means, and use it to conceal her true identity. I would later learn from my street contacts and mutual fences that the woman who fenced the art piece was Ma'Fan. I would become all too familiar with that name in the years following.

Since that first time I encountered her in Manhattan, Ma'Fan has stolen artistic works such as *The Loss of Innocence* from the Tate Museum in London, relics of religious figures from the Vatican Museums in Rome, portraits of newly Awakened magicians from the “Virgin Casters” exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, *Snapshot of the Forgotten* (a powerful piece dedicated to the Renraku citizens who lost their lives in the arcology shutdown) from the Neo-Tokyo Imperial Museum, and *Plight of All Metahumans* from the Musée du Louvre in Paris. I even suspect that Ma'Fan may have been involved in the original theft of the Phaistos Disc (if only as a consultant to the actual thief, Malcolm Carella) from the Heraklion Archaeological Museum.

In our rivalry, we have each experienced victories and defeats. I am a bit heartbroken to say that I lost Jackson Pollock's *No. 5, 1948*, to Ma'Fan. I was an hour too late to recover Monet's *Le Bassin Aux Nymphéas* before she got it. I also was unfortunate enough to lose out on both Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents* and Picasso's *Three Musicians*. Despite these bitter losses, Ma'Fan and I both realize that there is always time to right our missed opportunities. The game goes on, and we each fight to reclaim what the other has stolen.

Recently, Ma'Fan has also shown interest in several of the lesser-known artifacts from Dunkelzahn's will, looking for an

even greater challenge and thrill. Items she's gone after include the Coins of Luck (I am proud to say that I beat Ma'Fan out of the second coin, the coin of Longevity; I know when it was taken, and who might have it now, something that I know will infuriate that woman), the arrow of Red Dragon slaying, the Rose Crystal, and the Jade Dragon of Wind and Fire. Word on the street is someone is in negotiations to hire Ma'Fan to look into what was in the boxes that were marked for George "Locomotive" Fenamore as mentioned in Dunkelzahn's will, and whether the boxes were actually destroyed as was ordered.

- You know, I thought a lot about those locked steel boxes. And I came to the conclusion that some mysteries are best left unsolved.
- Lyran
- Mika! Damn you! I've been looking eighteen months for that fragging coin! Argh! The next time I see you, we won't be exchanging pleasantries or witty banter!
- Ma'Fan

Ma'Fan's philosophy is simple: move silently and remain invisible. To that end, Ma'Fan typically deploys a variety of drugs and poisons on metahuman guards and their guard animals: Laés, Slab, Narcoject, Breathtaker, Gamma-Scopolamine. These drugs are usually mixed with DMSO and applied to Ma'Fan's bladed weapons. Her mistrust of technology goes deep enough that she avoids items like dart pistols or capsule rounds. Ma'Fan also isn't afraid to slit throats with her bladed weapons, but only as a last resort. Her weapon of choice is the ninja shuko hand claws, which not only assists her in climbing and scaling various walls and other obstacles, but can also be used as a defensive melee weapon.

MA'FAN

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	6	6 (7)	5	4	4	5	4	11	6 (7)	6	10 (11)	1 (2)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 4/0

Skills: Assensing 4, Blades 6, Chemistry 4, Climbing 4, Con 5, Disguise (Cosmetic) 6 (+2), Dodge (Melee) 4 (+2), Etiquette 3, Escape Artist 4, Exotic Melee Weapon (Ninja Shuko) 5, First Aid 3, Gymnastics 5, Hardware (Maglocks) 4 (+2), Infiltration (Urban) 7 (+2), Intimidation 3, Locksmith 6, Negotiations 6, Palming 6, Parachuting 2, Perception 6, Pilot Aircraft 4, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pilot Watercraft 2, Running 4, Swimming 4, Unarmed Combat (Subdual Combat) 5 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Art Styles 4, Art History 5, SOTA Security Systems 4, Magical Security 6, Art Fences 5, Magical Theory 3, Cantonese 3, English 5, Mandarin N

Qualities: Aptitude (Infiltration), Erased (5 pts), Exceptional Attribute (Edge), Gremlins (20 pts), Mentor Spirit (Cat)

Initiate Level: 5

Adept Powers: Astral Perception, Attribute Boost (Agility) 4, Cloak 4, Combat Sense 1, Commanding Voice, Eidetic Sense Memory, Facial Sculpt 4, Great Leap 2, Improved Reflexes 1, Improved Sense (Direction Sense, Low-Frequency Hearing, Low-Light Vision, Thermographic Vision), Melanin Control, Nimble Fingers, Power Throw 2, Traceless Walk, Voice Control

Metamagics: Adept centering, cognition, flexible signature, masking, somatic control

Gear: Armor clothing, Binoculars (optical), 3 doses Breathtaker, endoscope, 6 doses Gamma-Scopolamine, grapple gun, 3 doses Laés, light stick, lockpick set, microwire, miniwelder, myomeric rope, 6 doses Narcoject, periscope, rappelling gloves, 3 doses Slab, stealth rope w/ catalyst stick

Weapons:

Ninja shuko [Blades, Reach 0, DV 4P, AP 0]

Throwing knives [Throwing Weapons, Reach 0, DV 6P, AP 0]

Ceramic knife [Blades, Reach 0, DV 4P, AP 0]

Cougar Fineblade knife (short blade) [Blades, Reach 0, DV 4P, AP -1]



PARLOR TRICKS

BY MALIK TOMS

The moment after I saved Timur's life I knew I'd have to kill him. I could see it in his eyes. A man like that couldn't handle the debt. For what it's worth, I'm not the one who finally pulled the trigger. Although that doesn't make me any less guilty, especially after how this thing started.

They'd finally caught up to him near Chayka, coming out of a flesh parlor owned by his boss, Nikolay Podatev. Even the Triads weren't stupid enough to attack Timur on Vory turf, so they let him drive a few blocks before some spike-haired teenager lobbed a grenade under his car. I hadn't been expecting that.

The SUV flipped twice and landed on its side, making the doors useless. I stepped out into the street and took out the eager teenage hurler who was about to finish the job. The kid couldn't have been older than fifteen, but already the sigils of two kills were emblazoned on his cheek. He'd almost made it to three. The boy had another grenade pressed into his palm. I took it, careful not to disturb the pin. Then I went to the car. I yanked hard on Timur's plump forearm, sucking him through the windshield of his crushed Toyota Coaster. The other Triad soldiers were closing on us quickly. I could hear their boots slapping the concrete

beyond the howl of a half-dozen car alarms. I tossed the grenade into the front seat. Seconds later the Coaster was a car-b-que.

"We need to move before they block off the road," I said. I could see his face go through all of the stages. First surprise, then recognition, then something I didn't like. He started to speak, his jaws working slowly, but he thought better of it and fixed me with an uncertain stare. My pickup was stashed in an alley barely a block away. We closed the distance in a few seconds, me half dragging, half carrying the fat man through the streets. Anyone who noticed us drive away pretended not to.

"Thank you," Timur said. He caught his breath after another moment and added, "My name is—"

"Timur Alexandrei. I know. I was looking for you." Sweat poured down the front of his purple silk shirt. His tacky gold jacket was ripped in several places. Timur had some scrapes and bruises, but the armored SUV had gotten him through okay. He was nervous and squirrely. His round face flushed red. I wasn't sure if it was the adrenaline winding down or genuine suspicion. He said, "I know who you are too. You are the one they call Mihoshi Oni."



I didn't like the way he was studying me. I'd seen it before with the Yakuza. An impolite mixture of fascination, attraction, and revulsion. Non-metas aren't generally attracted to troll women, but I am Fomori, which means my looks are more fairy tale than nightmare. I threaded my fingers through my long black hair, playing on his attraction. I managed the best baby-doll voice a troll possibly can and said, "Do you know who those men were?"

Timur's expression turned sour. He nodded and said, "The Ten Thousand Lions Triad. Those gangsters have been after my head for some time. I don't know how they found me."

"One of the women at the brothel—one of your regulars—talked."

"How do you know this?"

"How do you think I found you?"

Timur grumbled again, turning his attention to the scrapes and cuts marring his arms and legs. Outside of the car, Vladivostok Sprawl gave way to the frigid wastes of Russia. To the east lay the dark scar of the Sea of Japan, and beyond that my home. We pushed northward on M-60. The road ahead of us winding toward Manchuria, a place neither of us would be safe. I pulled over at the first rest stop outside the city, easing my GAZ Pickup into a covered stall away from the flickering lights of a single bathroom.

My passenger was regaining his composure. He said, "So, what now. You have kidnapped me. I am a banker. I can pay."

"I just saved your ass, Timur. Show a little courtesy." I pulled my overcoat up around my ears and stepped out into the night. Timur followed.

"What am I supposed to think? I have no relationship with you, yet here we are, standing in the cold in the middle of the night, and for no good reason I can think of, you have just saved my life."

"Like I said, I was looking for you."

He grunted at that and started digging in his pockets for a cigarette. None survived the accident, but I was ready with an India Red and a lighter.

"The Ten Thousand Lions came to my apartment four nights ago," I said. "They came heavy. Had I been asleep, I'd still be sleeping now. For whatever reason, they are out to settle debts. When I heard you were next on the list, I decided to warn you. And maybe earn a favor in the process."

He seemed to believe it. Which made sense, since it was a believable tale. Timur finished the cigarette and started on a second. Besides the brothels, smoking was his only real vice. I admired that about him. My vices read like a secretary's to-do list. At the top, *haute couture*. Fashion is one of the few things that make me feel like a lady, which is why I was having a hard time not retching at the sight of the man. Timur Alexandrei was a pig of a man. He'd become known for his expensive silk shirts and leisure jackets woven from gold lamé. The fashionista in me was disgusted. The bodyguard in me saw that it made Timur a target. You can't blend in when you look the way he does, or the way I do. Someone is bound to notice and take advantage of an easy mark.

"I think I know a way out of this for both of us." Timur looked dubious, but he waited for me to continue. "Your *sovetnik*, Podatev. He trusts you. He can talk to the Triads and solve this problem." A *sovetnik* is the Russian equivalent of a mid-level boss. Timur's boss controlled a handful of neighborhoods in Vladivostok. He had enough pull to bring the Triads to the table, maybe even make them back off of Timur.

"Why would Podatev want to help you?" Timur said, staring out the window.

"He wouldn't, but you are *gruppa obespechenie*, you know

where all of his money is hidden. It is in his best interests to protect you. He'll help you, and right now you owe me."

Timur considered this for a moment. He studied the pack of India Reds, considering a third. Finally he nodded and said, "I will set it up, but I cannot promise you anything. Afterwards we are even. You saved my life, so now I will save both of ours."

Nikolay Podatev never stayed in one place very long. Several organized crime groups, including the Yakuza, were looking to make an example out of him. Timur made the call from my commlink—he'd lost his in the crash. It took him five minutes to do the legwork a dozen well-placed contacts had failed to do. I started up the car and pointed it toward Vladivostok. We didn't talk for most of the drive. Timur slept while I stayed focused on the road. There was a chance someone spotted my pickup when I rescued him. The Triads still wanted his head on a plate, so I wanted to be ready for another ambush. When we were five minutes out I gently shook him awake. He smiled at me, offering that peculiar stare I quickly grew to hate. He said, "Did you know that we Russians have another name for you?"

"Is that right?" I said, not really caring one way or the other. The fact that Podatev's people called me anything at all was good news. It meant I'd earned a fair amount of street cred in Vladivostok.

"We call you *Rusalka*. It is a bit of a play on words. We say you are the monster that came from across the water, so we named you after our water demon. Just like the name you chose means beautiful demon."

My name doesn't mean that, but it wasn't the time for semantics. "Well, it's good to know my name is out there."

"Tell me, how is it that so many of us in this line of work know who you are? Is Mihoshi Oni really the great samurai she is said to be?"

I started laughing despite myself. I actually thought Timur was kidding until I met his gaze. He was serious about the question, in the way a kid asks her parents who Santa Claus really is when she grows too old for fairy tales. I shook my head and said, "I'm not that special, Timur. I don't know a single runner who is. What we do is all about obfuscation. Parlor tricks. Occasionally you get lucky and get into a scrap with someone who already made their name. You take them down, and suddenly you're more dangerous than they are. I made my rep that way. I played it up. I made sure I was seen protecting all the right clients. It was a bit of a game for them to have the pretty troll guarding their back. My clients said the right things about me, mostly to make themselves sound more important, but it makes me seem more talented than I actually am. It isn't much different from what people like Podatev do."

"I do not think Podatev uses these parlor tricks. He is a butcher. I have seen what he does to those who cross him. He will not kill them, not at first. He will take away their family, and when they have nothing, when they beg him for the mercy of death, he tortures them until they can stand it no longer. I do not think you are like that, *Rusalka*."

Silence crept into the pickup. He was right about Podatev. We were different. I made my rep saving lives. The Vory man made his rep on the backs of the bystanders he killed. In the

shadows, your rep is everything. You cultivate it. You raise it like a child in the hopes it will pay you back one day, and it always does.

"Forgive me for saying so, but Podatev is a fool. He rules out of fear. That kind of leadership lasts only as long as you're the strongest person in the room, and you're never that for long. Real lasting leadership requires *giri*."

"Who is this Gary you speak of?"

Keeping my eyes from rolling required super-metahuman effort. "It isn't a who, it's a what. The way I do business requires that I have people close to me who I can rely on, for information, for work, for protection. We who do favors for each other are loyal to each other. If I need something that requires a more delicate hand than I'm capable of there are friends I can turn to. In return, I am obligated to extend my services to them."

It was his turn to laugh. "It sounds like a very dangerous way to do business. How do you know what they will ask you to do?"

"I don't. I have to trust that they will ask only what I am capable of, and trust they will repay me down the road. Regardless, I will do what they ask of me, even if it gets me killed. In Japan we call that *giri*."

"It is a wonder any of the Yakuza are alive at all." He chuckled. Timur's directions led me to Ermilova Estates, an exclusive nest of townhomes far enough away from the corporate sector to be overlooked. A no-nonsense-looking ork armed with an assault rifle was waiting for us at the front gate. Timur shouted at him to let us pass, and we drove a long road past two semi-circles of townhomes. The banker directed me to a third semi-circle backed up against a glade of trees. I almost blushed when we parked in front of the third house. The cars in the driveways were worth more than I've made this decade.

Timur told me the apartment belonged to Podatev's mistress, a model who most recently graced the cover of *Vogue*. I'd probably seen her. "Leave your weapons. If Nikolay sees that you are armed, he will kill you. His men are former Spetsnaz, very skilled at what they do."

There were two of them, non-metas who could pass for small orks in the dark. The larger one reached my armpits. I made a point to smile down at him while he frisked me, all tusks and white teeth. He was carrying a Ceska machine pistol on a sling holster. I filed that information away for later. The shorter guard stepped back and watched, resting his hands on his hips. A Ruger heavy pistol was jammed into his waistband.

Nikolay Podatev kept an office on the second floor. The guards stopped me at the doorway but let Timur continue through. Podatev was seated behind the desk at the far end of the room, his mistress standing behind him wearing eyelash lace lingerie that could pass for dental floss and a Vashon chemise that offered the pretense of modesty. Podatev was less modest. His Mortimer robe was open to the waist. He had a nickel-plated Sig Sauer sitting on the desk, and his nose was buried in a mound of brown powder that I took to be tempo. The Vory man took a last snort and then rose to greet his friend. I took the opportunity to scan the room.

A sitting area bridged the space between the door and the desk. It consisted of two cream-colored couches with a small

coffee table between them. A tray sitting on a table held a bottle of vodka and a neat stack of glasses.

Timur embraced his associate, and then pointed at the two guards to let me in. They both stepped aside, turned when I passed, and followed me into the room. I sat down on a couch, pretending to relax. The Mihoshi Oni they knew about would stay cool in this situation. It's unfortunate that she doesn't exist, but I was going to do my best to act like a good approximation of her. My heart thumped wildly in my chest, but I kept smiling, weaving my fingers through my hair.

"You have brought friends, Timur?" Nikolay Podatev said. His voice was a rich baritone that matched his muscular form. There was none of the slurring I'd seen from recreational tempo users after a hit. That told me he'd been using for some time. Podatev switched to Russian, perhaps thinking I couldn't understand. He told his mistress, Svetlana, to wait for him in the bedroom. Then he called Timur an idiot.

The banker responded in Russian as well. He said, "She saved my life, Nikolay. The Triad found me, and she rescued me from them."

"You are wise with hiding money, Timur, but you are a fat fool. At any point did you consider that this creature could be setting you up?"

"How do you mean?"

"How do I mean?" He repeated the words more as a statement than question. "I mean she could be the one who told the Triad where you would be. She could have saved you, just to gain your trust."

"Why would she do that?"

Podatev switched from Russian back to English. The anger flooding his voice made his accent thick and difficult to understand. "Yes, why would you do that, Rusalka? I am willing to bet it was your idea to come to me."

All four of the men were staring at me. The two bodyguards took up positions on opposite sides of the room, hands on their weapons. The larger guard moved to the edge of my line of sight off to the left and behind me. Podatev said, "So, tell us. Did you set up Timur just so you could get closer to me?"

I sighed, pretending to pick lint off my slacks while surveying the room a final time. I saw the shorter guard take another step closer, just inside my reach. Then I looked Nikolay Podatev in the eyes and I said, "Yes."

The larger guard moved first, reaching for the machine pistol. I slid off the couch, dropped to one knee, and spun the smaller guard in front of me. The full burst drilled into his chest. I was already moving when the guard fired again. I'm two-and-a-half meters tall, but I still fight like a girl—all knees and elbows and sharp places. I brought my elbow up under the larger guard's chin. There was a dull crack. I felt the bone give, and he slumped to the floor.

Podatev reached for his Sig Sauer. I lashed out an arm slapping it away. I yanked the Ruger from the smaller guard's waistband and pointed it at Podatev. He took a step back and growled, "If you kill me, troll, my people will hunt down everyone who ever knew you. They will suffer, and only then will you be allowed to die."

"You misunderstand, Mr. Podatev. I am not an assassin." I stood there a moment while the confusion sank in. I motioned for Timur to stand aside, and then I shoved Podatev back into his seat, leveling the Ruger at his head. "Do you remember what you did last month in Shinjuku?"

Podatev scowled and looked away.

"Inagawa Hiroki felt very disrespected by your actions. He wanted to kill you and send parts of you to all of the other bosses. But Master Hiroki is a generous man. He has done many favors for me. So I volunteered to do a favor for him."

I kept the gun trained on Podatev while I deliberately spread out a small ceremonial handkerchief on the table. "Before guns, business was handled with a blade. Your skill with a sword kept people from taking advantage of you. Unfortunately, you cannot properly grip a blade without your pinky. Therefore the people who were punished in this way were forced to rely upon the local Oyuban to defend them. So, you see, it is symbolic."

I grabbed his left hand, and pinned it to the table. He tried to struggle, but I outweighed him by a hundred and fifty kilos. He screamed for Timur to do something, call someone. Timur just watched.

"My taking your pinky shows that you cannot protect yourself. From here forward, you must rely on the Inagawa-Gumi for all of your business dealings in Neo-Tokyo. Do you understand?"

"You are not part of the Yakuza! You are a freelancer. We have no problem, you and I. Why would you do this?!" Podatev pleaded.

I shrugged and said, "*Giri*."

Taking off his finger was fast work. He gritted his teeth and grunted angrily under his breath. I admired his toughness. When it was over I wrapped the part of his finger above the top knuckle in the ceremonial cloth and stuck it down my shirt. I'd move it to a safer place after I was gone, but for now it had the desired effect.

"Go fuck yourself, you crazy bitch! I'll remember you. I will find you and I will kill you slowly!"

I smiled. "Yes you could do that. But that would cost you resources it would take to kill me. Resources you would need to justify to the *organizatsi*. Which would mean admitting I got this close. So you won't come after me. You have a code just like I have a code. We do what works. Right now, the only people who know about what happened here today are me, you, and of course Timur."

The Vory *sovetnik* and I both looked at Timur, who was trying as hard as possible to disappear into the corner. Podatev cradled his wounded hand, staring angrily at his associate. "You brought this bitch to me."

I didn't like the name calling, but I liked the idea of escalating the situation even less. My job was done. If Podatev died now, it meant that I failed. Keeping your cool is how you make your rep. Killing people does no good, because then everyone who knows what you are capable of is too dead to talk about it. I started for the door.

"Where are you going?" Timur pleaded.

I didn't bother to reply.

MARCOS

POSTED BY: JONATHAN BLAKE

VITAL STATS: MARCOS

Age: 37 **Height:** 1.76 m
Weight: 83 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

- I brought in an outside for this one, because I figured that when you're hiring a gun, it's good to know what other people who have hired that gun think. Blake has worked with Marcos, and he's a knowledgeable guy who is direct with his opinions. Plus, I thought letting him write for this would help keep him from getting too mad about having some of his own secrets exposed in the piece about him.
- Fastjack
- Didn't work.
- Jonathan Blake

There are a lot of theories out there about what makes a good hired gun. Courage is important, of course, as is the ability to stay cool under fire. Creativity is good, but so is the ability to follow orders quickly, without always questioning what you are told. The technical skills are important, too—the ability to shoot accurately, reload quickly, and get a gun working when it jams or has some other problem.

In the end, though, the things an employer values in a mercenary boil down to one thing—survivability. A good mercenary is one who can plunge into almost any situation, no matter how hellish, and come out alive (note that the plunging part is important, as a mercenary who survives by avoiding the fight is of no good to anyone). It's not that the employers care that much about the individuals they're hiring; it's just the simple fact that a dead man doesn't get anything done.

The man known as Marcos is a good mercenary.

Marcos is a survivor, pure and simple. No matter the situation, no matter how the odds are stacked against him, he can find a way out. He was born with the odds stacked against him, and he's been fighting them, both literally and figuratively, for his entire life.

- Hold on. I gotta load up a soundtrack of inspirational strings while I read this so I can be sufficiently impressed. Okay, there. Ready to roll.
- Slamm-O!

The first thing to know is that "Marcos" is not the name he was born with. He adopted it later in life, basically because it was unassuming and different than the name he grew up with, which

has been lost to the mists of time. Marcos was essentially born into a gang. His grandfather, a ripe old man of 47, was a senior member of a Managua street gang known as the Four Kings, his father spent most of his life running with that gang, and when Marcos came of age, he was expected to join the gang, too.

- It's important to know that as far as this particular gang is concerned, "coming of age" happens at nine.
- Picador

Marcos was young when his time came, but he had already seen the effect gang life had on his father and grandfather (both took pride in showing off their assorted scars inflicted by bullets and blades), and he had something different in mind for himself. It wasn't that he was scared of a fight, but he didn't think the benefits they gained from their lifestyle were worth the price they paid. If he was going to have bullets flying near him, he damned sure was going to do more with his life than play stupid street gang games for year after year. So when the Four Kings approached him about doing some work, he didn't turn them down, but he didn't jump on board for full membership. Instead, he ran some errands, ferrying goods and messages back and forth, keeping his head down and being reliable but easy to overlook.

It didn't take him long to figure out that if he paid attention to the information he was carrying, he'd have a pretty good idea of when and where gang violence was about to erupt. He started working on his timing, and eventually he became pretty good at hitting the scenes of shootouts shortly after the gunfire stopped, but before the authorities arrived. He'd scurry over these battlegrounds and scrape up any firearms he could. He'd take them home (keeping them away from the prying eyes of his father and grandfather), make sure they worked, clean them up a little, and get them ready for resale. That was the start of his gunrunning business.

- Best kind of merchandise for resale there is—the kind that already has all identifying information filed off or otherwise erased.
- Marcos

He was careful to spread his goods among several gangs, making him useful to all, but fully allied with none. That balance worked for a time, but if you're going to prosper enough to make a life for yourself, you're eventually going to come to the notice of the powers-that-be. A few years into Marcos' career as a weapons dealer, the Aztlan government came to call.

Officially, the authorities were upset that Marcos was feeding weapons to street gangs, which encouraged ongoing street violence. Unofficially, they were upset because the more weapons the street gangs bought through unofficial channels, the less they purchased through Aztechnology-approved back channels, and the Big A is never fond of anything that cuts into its profits.

Fortunately, Marcos had planned for this day, and he was fully prepared to accede to Aztlan's demands. In fact, he cut them off before they could even make their first threat. He told them he had a full list of his clients, and he'd happily turn them over to the government's weapons dealers. On top of that, he'd stop his own business, cutting himself out as competition. All he asked was the chance to occasionally act as security detail for the Azzie runners. The government reps, figuring he'd probably get himself killed pretty quickly in that role and take himself out as a source of trouble, agreed to his proposal.

Over the years, Marcos showed himself to be a valuable asset to Aztlan, though as was his custom, he resisted any attempts to bring him in as a full-timer. He didn't sell any more weapons to the gangs, but he ran a few security details for them, just to keep his nose in the business and make it clear to Aztlan that they didn't own him. As was the case in his gunrunning days, his independence was bolstered by his competence. His ability to think fast was put to the test in these days, as security situations in Aztlan are unpredictable and can change rapidly. In one notable instance, Marcos accepted a contract to protect an Aztlan official traveling to Oaxaca, at the same time that he was on retainer to protect a lieutenant of a local branch of the David cartel when he was out and about. As it turned out, the official had been introducing some strident anti-cartel legislation, and the lieutenant thought it would be a good idea to make an example of him. This led to one man Marcos was supposed to guard driving in to attack another. Marcos did not have much time to respond to this situation (the lieutenant didn't share his assassination plans with anyone but his innermost circle), but he was able to improvise a solution that kept both of his charges alive. It was fairly elegant in its simplicity—he flattened tires of the official's convoy vehicles, slowing them down, then moved ahead quickly to the ambush point where the lieutenant was positioned. He tracked down each member of the lieutenant's crew, one by one, and took them out, killing all but the lieutenant—and leaving no trace that he had been the one behind the deaths. Once he realized that he was alone, the lieutenant called off the assault, and both men survived the day—though plenty of bodies were left in their wake.

- This is a good introduction to Marcos' brand of morality. I would never say that he is entirely amoral, but his morality is very situational. Like a lot of us, Marcos' highest standard is getting his job done in as smooth a manner as possible. Since preventing deaths usually helps prevent trouble, he'll go in that direction if he can—but only because it avoids trouble, not because he has a strong compunction about taking human life. As a mercenary, he certainly sees his share of situations where gunfire is necessary, and when that's the case, he generally is fast and deadly, making quick strikes to eliminate whatever obstacles might be in his way.
- Black Mamba
- Most of that sounds like me, though I guess we could have a discussion about just what it means to have a compunction against taking human life. I'm not as cold-blooded as you make me sound—I'd generally prefer people to remain alive, no matter who they are. Most of all, though, I want to keep myself alive, along with my clients and people I care about. Is that really that different from anyone else?
- Marcos



- Only when you look at things in terms of actual body counts.
- Frosty

Marcos' next career move came not out of planning but necessity. Like anyone who does regular work for Aztlan or Aztechnology, he had been in more than one situation where the dice seemed loaded against him, but he survived and figured such things were just a part of doing business. His last run for Aztlan, though, put him in a bad spot. In the long run, cartels tend to either eliminate or co-opt any quality talent they encounter, and Marcos had been around long enough to be noticed—and to make it clear he was not interested in being co-opted. Against his better judgment, he took a job protecting one of Ding Ramos' clubbing friends, and it seemed all was going well until one night when the friend's limo pulled up to a club, and the friend was dead inside. Marcos was tailing the limo the whole time, and he never saw any attack or evidence of the shot that killed the man. He knew it was bad enough to have a death on his watch, but he soon realized how bad it was when Ramos' people started spreading the word that it wasn't lax security that was responsible for the man's death, but rather a deliberate assassination by Marcos. They weren't serious about this—if they were, Marcos very well might not be among us—but rather used it as a hint to Marcos that they'd prefer him to leave the country. He did, and he carried with him a fair amount of bitterness toward his former homeland. He settled in Bogotá, which was enough of a free city to keep Aztlan from bothering him while he plied his trade.

- Great nations nurture and harness their native talent. Mediocre nations chase that talent away. Gives me reason to be upset, doesn't it?
- Marcos

The move hasn't hurt Marcos much, as he transitioned from security work to mercenary jobs, where his accuracy, stealth, and improvisational skills were even more valued than before. The Az-Am War has given him the chance to exercise some of his ill will toward Aztlan, and he has become a skilled and enthusiastic jungle fighter. He still runs plenty of guns, but now he fires them more often than he used to.

In one recent encounter, he had Aztlan soldiers running through a gauntlet filled with Awakened soldiers perched high above the canopy who, upon instructions from mindlinked mages on the ground, dropped grenades from above and shaking the nerves of the soldiers. The experience was so nerve-racking that the time they emerged from the jungle, they were so exhausted that they immediately dropped their guard and became easy pickings for Marcos, who was waiting for them at the rainforest's edge.

As the situation to the south remains unpredictable, Marcos will continue to find work. There's plenty of money to be made by someone who can keep a cool head and turn on a dime while bullets are flying by.

Marcos is doing more merc work than he used to do, but he has in no wise given up on the gun running. Where he used to do it for survival, he now has more discretion in picking and choosing his clients. He still has a distaste for outright alliance, but his experiences with the capitalist autocracy that is Aztlan made him very sympathetic to anarchist and neo-Communist causes, and he works more with smaller groups than he does with the big nations on either side of the conflict. He's done plenty of work with Los Matan Gigantes, and he has plenty of sympathies with Erika Anohi and her operation. His true affection, though, is with the tribals, and he has both supplied weapons to and gone on missions for Victor's People. He is trying to get Victor Alejandra to see past his fight with the Ch'ujutat Tribes and to understand that the more they target larger enemies (read: Aztlan), the better. He has to admit, though, that Victor has a point when he says that any fight his people wage would be more effective if they had a homeland from which they could fight.

- Marcos has long suspected that Aztlan was behind the bombing that wiped out Victor's People's territory, but he has not been able to put together a case persuasive enough to get Victor to go along with him. I don't think he's quite to the point where he'll hire someone to manufacture the evidence he needs, but he's certainly willing to gather as much evidence as possible that makes Aztlan look guilty while pushing to the side anything that might exonerate them.
- Hard Exit
- Are you talking about in the case of Victor's people, or in the case of anything to do with Aztlan?
- Cosmo
- Same old story. Open your eyes to the reality of what the corps and their national government puppets are doing, and people jump all over you to say you're one-sided, while they conveniently ignore the distorted propaganda the corporations constantly spew.
- Aufheben
- Defensive much?
- /dev/grrl



MARCOS

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
 4 7 (11) 6 (8) 4 3 6 4 5 6 0.2 12 (14) 1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 11/7

Skills: Armorer 2, Blades 3, Dodge 4, Exotic Ranged Weapon (Flamethrower) 4, Firearms skill group 6, Gunnery 2, Infiltration 3, Intimidation 3, Leadership 2, Parachuting 2, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft 3, Pilot Watercraft 2, Running 3, Survival 4, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Aztlan Street Gangs 4, Aztlan Politics 2, Bogotá Streets 4, Cartel Structure 3, Mercenary Groups 4, Military Tactics 4, Weapons Manufacturers 3, English 5, Japanese 2, Spanish N

Qualities: Exceptional Attribute (Agility), Guts, High Pain Tolerance, Toughness

Augmentations: Aluminum bone lacing, cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ flare compensation, low-light vision, smartlink, thermographic vision], muscle toner 4, platelet factories, wired reflexes 2

Gear: 150 rounds APDS ammo (100 assault rifle, 50 heavy pistol), armor jacket, commlink (Hermes Ikon w/ Novatech Navi, Response 4, Signal 3, Firewall 3, System 4), 100 rounds EX-ex ammo (assault rifle), 2 x fake licenses for weapons (Rating 5), Fake SINs (Rating 4), form-fitting body armor (shirt), 2 x medkit (Rating 5), micro flare launcher w/ 10 x micro flares, respirator (Rating 4), 150 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (100 assault rifle, 50 heavy pistol)

Weapons:

Ares HVAR [Assault rifle, DV 5P or 6P or 6S(e), AP — or -1 or -half, SA/BF/FA, RC 3 (4), 50 (c), w/ 100 rounds APDS ammo, 100 rounds EX-ex ammo, and 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]

Cougar Fineblade Knife (Long Blade) [Blade, Reach —, DV 4P, AP -1]

HK Urban Fighter [Heavy pistol, DV 5P or 6S(e), AP -1 or -5 or -half, SA, RC —, 10 (c)]

MIKA

POSTED BY: MA'FAN

VITAL STATS: MIKA

Age: 31	Height: 1.73 m
Weight: 78.2 kg	Hair: Black
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: Yes (Adept)

Mika and I have been rivals for over seven years now. Simply put, he's a pain in the ass, he's driven, he's resourceful, and like it or not (I certainly don't), he is one of the best in the world when it comes to infiltrating secured buildings (despite having a methodology that I despise). He is definitely a worthy adversary, deserving of (some) respect for his accomplishments.

What holds Mika back from being truly in my league is his overdependence on high-tech gadgets like maglock sequencers, cellular glove molders, and keycard copiers. He leaves himself vulnerable should his high-tech gear ever fail him, or should circumstances somehow deny their use to him. It is my belief that there is nothing that high-tech gear can do that ingenuity, experience, and planning cannot mimic, or even surpass (I should know—I have beaten Mika and his high-tech gear at this cat-and-mouse game on several occasions). High-tech gear is often a crutch, doing things for you that you should be able to do on your own. Relying too much on high-tech gear for any length of time teaches you to be sloppy and threatens to take the edge off your natural abilities, while at the same time providing a convenience that does not force you to reach your full potential. High-tech gear allows you to take shortcuts, whereas doing things the hard way (i.e., the old-fashioned way) might be better for your long-term goals and might open new avenues to you that you might not otherwise see. What is regrettable about Mika is that he is an exceptional adept, and he could be even better than what he is now at breaking and entering if he gave up his addiction to his sophisticated gear, and focused himself more on honing his natural abilities. As of this date, however, it is a choice that Mika has not made for himself, and until he does, he will always be restricted by his own, self-imposed limitations.

- Anyone else notice that my write-up of Ma'Fan started by talking about how good she was, and her write-up of me focuses on what she thinks I do wrong? Nice.
- Mika

Unlike me (privileged to be SINless), Mika was born into a middle-class corporate family employed by Gaeatronics. That

upbringing came with a SIN and an inescapable datatrail. Mika was born Enapay King in Cheyenne in the Sioux Nation in January 2043. Much of his early life was unremarkable—he only achieved a 2.7 GPA in his high school years (sad, really—I expected better from him). When he turned eighteen in 2061, Mika met his country's mandatory military service obligation and joined the Sioux Defense Force (SDF), where he earned the nickname "Mika," which means "intelligent raccoon," from his squad members. The handle seems to originate from his time in basic training. As a new recruit, Mika built a reputation for being able to find and acquire anything on base, even items that new recruits should not have access to, including unlimited day passes, additional credits to the commissary, forbidden and restricted items from the UCAS, and even additional Matrix privileges.

- I'm curious about how you got all this information. One of the first things I did when I went into the shadows was abandon my original SIN, and when I could, I had several competent hackers erase everything they could find on me. I was assured that my past was dead and buried.
- Mika
- Maybe you should have asked FastJack to make sure your info was truly gone. In all seriousness, datatrails are insidious. Just because you may have gotten rid of some of your past from a few databases doesn't mean there isn't information on you elsewhere. Your Sioux records were thoroughly erased, but the files the UCAS government had on you seemed to be pretty intact, as were Evo's. Oh, and there was a ton of information I found on you from your P2.0 account (you do spend way too much time on those gossip sites, by the way). This is why I do whatever I can to minimize my datatrails. You should learn from my example. Even though my fascination with cats may be a signature for me, your glaring datatrail is yours. Which is strange, because between you and me, you are the one who knows more about computers and should know better.
- Ma'Fan

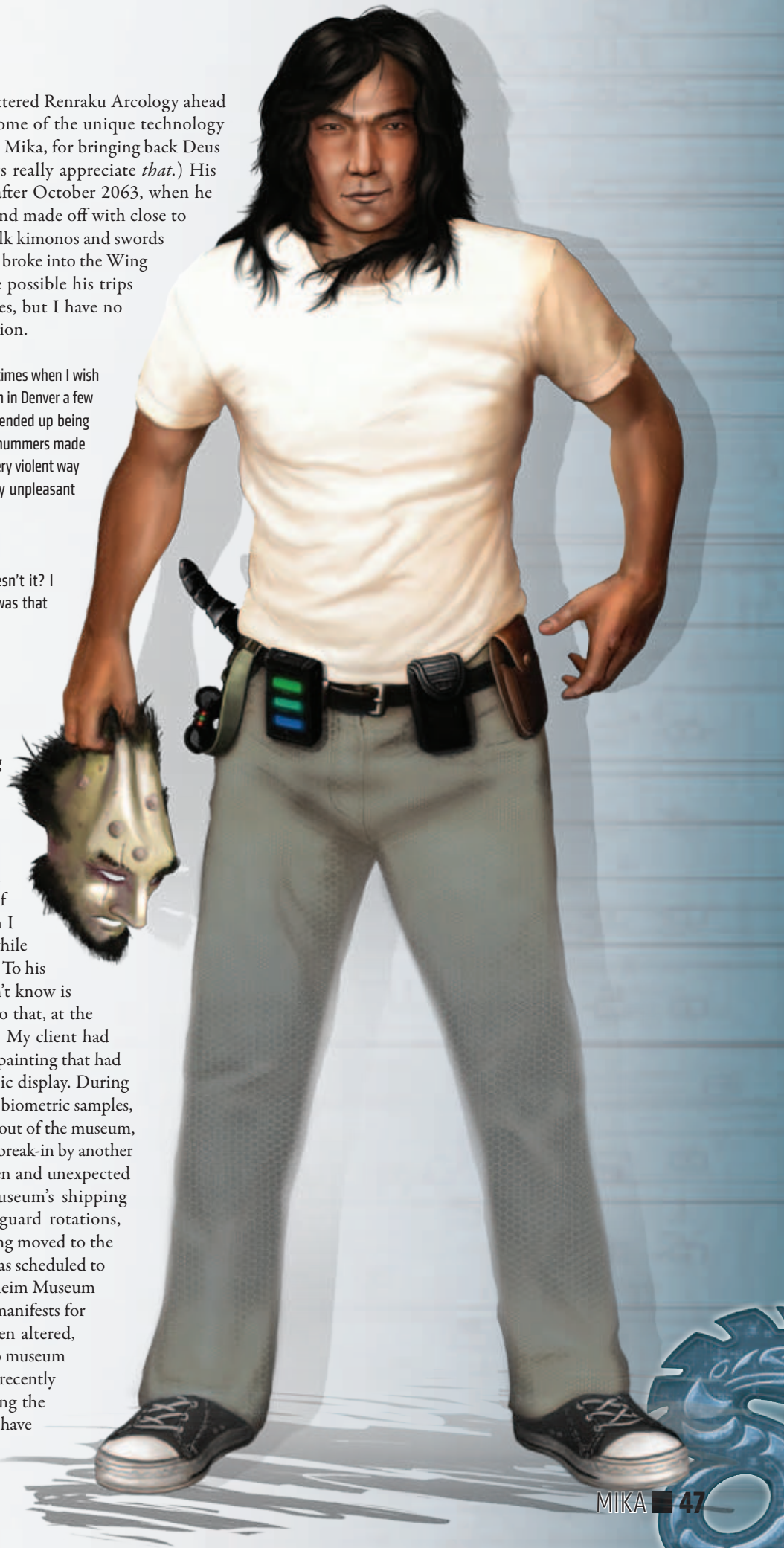
His ability to scrounge helped Mika turn a pretty good profit for himself while in the military, much to the chagrin of his superior officers. Mika's military service was not exemplary, and he had three reprimands placed on his permanent record for starting fights with his fellow troops, and he was charged with four counts of stealing (although those charges were never proven and were later dropped). Because of the insubordination on his record, his superiors chose to punish him by giving him an additional mandatory year in the SDF. Grudgingly, Mika served out that extension and was discharged from military service on January 15, 2062, along with a couple of his squad members. At that time, Mika went off the grid.

It is widely believed that he started his career as a shadowrunner on the streets of Seattle. He excelled at breaking and entering into corporate facilities such as the Aztechnology Pyramid and the former Renraku Arcology (once Deus and his minions had been cleared out). It is believed Mika was one

of the few thieves willing to entering the battered Renraku Arcology ahead of the UCAS Army engineers to recover some of the unique technology covered by the other megcorps. (Thank you, Mika, for bringing back Deus like the cutter nanites. Your fellow runners really appreciate *that*.) His signature as an art thief began to take off after October 2063, when he broke into the Wing Luke Asian museum and made off with close to two million nuyen in stolen artifacts, from silk kimonos and swords to rare masks and figurines. By the time Mika broke into the Wing Luke museum, he was a solo act. It is quite possible his trips into the arcology took the lives of his omaes, but I have no conclusive evidence to support that supposition.

- No, they didn't die in the arcology (though there are times when I wish they had). We had made a big score robbing a museum in Denver a few months prior to my job at the Wing Luke. The score ended up being somewhere around five million nuyen. My so-called chummers made an agreement among themselves to cut me out in a very violent way and keep my share. Needless to say, things got very unpleasant after that.
- Mika
- Betrayal seems to happen quite often to you, doesn't it? I mean, on top of your omaes betraying you, there was that well-known incident with Evo ...
- Ma'Fan
- I really don't want to talk about it.
- Mika
- I was just going to say that maybe it's your charming personality that puts you into those situations. Maybe you should look into that.
- Ma'Fan

Mika believes the first time we crossed paths was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan in November 2066, when I acquired the art piece *Ghost Dance Justice* while he grabbed a set of Pre-Colombian pendants. To his knowledge, that is the truth. What he doesn't know is that I saw him in action two months prior to that, at the Guggenheim Museum (also in Manhattan). My client had hired me to retrieve a specific Paul Cézanne painting that had just been fully restored and readied for public display. During my prep time, while I gathered passcodes and biometric samples, palmed a few RFID cards, and learned the layout of the museum, I also discovered telltale signs of an imminent break-in by another infiltration team. I was tipped off by a sudden and unexpected change in delivery schedules from the museum's shipping company. There was a sudden change in guard rotations, with guards of not-so-stellar reputations being moved to the graveyard shift, and a new, substitute driver was scheduled to make deliveries and pick-ups to the Guggenheim Museum over a two-day period. I discovered that the manifests for both the deliveries and the pick-ups had been altered, with a few suspicious crates being delivered to museum workers who were either on leave or who had recently quit, delaying the museum staff from opening the crates up immediately. Once I realized I might have



competition, I decided I would move up my timetable so I could time my break-in with theirs. That would allow me to check out the strength of my competition and, if possible, use any mistakes they might make as diversions, allowing the museum's security to chase them while I tended to my own objectives.

On the night I believed the break-in would occur, I arrived and waited. I knew the other infiltration team's way in would be through the museum's loading dock. And around 0100 hours, the person whom I would later identify as Mika showed up. He had no trouble getting through the loading dock (I suspected he already knew the physical layout of the loading dock from making a delivery to the museum earlier in the day in his disguise as the delivery driver). As I expected, much of his gear was already inside the museum, planted in the bogus crates he had delivered. Mika already knew the individual guards' identities, patrol schedules, and bad habits. He knew that these particular guards would be about half an hour behind on their patrols, giving him a window he could exploit. As I followed Mika into the museum, I observed that he had expertly dealt with the technical security measures. He knew exactly where all the motion sensors and laser trip beams were, and he smoothly avoided all the pressure pads. Although his information-gathering techniques differed from mine, he obtained the same result: no alarms were tripped, and he worked uninterrupted. It took him less than twenty minutes to bypass the security measures in the exhibit hall and strip the paintings from their frames (including a Braque and a Degas). After he left the exhibit hall with his artwork, I grabbed what I needed and departed via my own escape route. I assumed he took the same way out that he took in, using crates that he had arranged to be shipped out the next day to carry out his equipment. When he came to do the pick-up the next day, he could walk his equipment out like it was just a part of his normal job while spying on the investigators to find out how much they knew about the thefts. I checked the electronic manifest for the deliveries and saw that Mika had remembered to erase the crates he had delivered to the Guggenheim Museum from the museum's records. It would probably be days before anyone would remember that a few crates marked for absent workers were now missing. By that time, Mika would be long gone with their paintings and his equipment. Overall, the job was professional and expertly pulled off (though had I known Mika back then and how much of a pain he could be for me, I might have been tempted to circle back and steal his gear).

Since those early days, Mika has become a global runner, pulling jobs in locations such as Manhattan, Seattle, Neo-Tokyo, DeeCee, LA, Hong Kong, London, and Paris. Since 2066, we have gotten in each other's way more times than I would care to remember (as you may have noticed from his write-up on me). Yes, I did take the portraits of the newly Awakened magicians from the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, but that was only as a consolation prize, after I learned that Mika had made off with what I had been intending to steal in the first place: *Astral Bliss*, an original sculpture by an adept named Sebastian Henry from 2024. The piece was believed to have been lost for close to two decades before it was recovered by Lone Star in a raid on a private collector's home in 2049. The value for that piece has only tripled in value since Henry disappeared last year (authorities believe it was due to his tempo addiction). I stole

the *Plight of All Metahumans* from the Musée du Louvre as a peace offering to my Ms. Johnson for failing to acquire the actual Van Gogh that she wanted in the first place. It took me four months to find the private collector who bought the painting from Mika so that I could steal it back from him for my original Johnson. That adventure cost me nearly a million nuyen, while also consuming time that I could have spent doing another job. And even now, Mika insists on taunting me, claiming to know the precise location of the second Coin of Luck, but refusing to tell me where it is or who holds it. One day, I may just have to end this rivalry. For now, I will bide my time and take vindictive pleasure in the small things—like knowing that I am still a better thief than Mika, and that one day I shall win out.

- Now, now, Ma'Fan. You've scolded me on taking shortcuts. What kind of person would I be if I allowed you to take a shortcut and just told you where that coin is? I'm actually making you better at your profession by making you look for it yourself.
- Mika
- Sarcasm does not become you.
- Ma'Fan

Mika can be pretty brazen in his intelligence-gathering for a target. One of the methods Mika employs that differs from my own is that he likes to get really close to the mark, closer than I would feel comfortable doing. In his jobs that have crossed with my interests, I have learned that he has posed as delivery men, executive assistants, journalists, guards, Lone Star cops, insurance claim investigators, and once even placed himself on the invite list for a high-level CAS political dinner and fundraiser, so that he could get close enough to a piece of artwork to steal it. While I take days or weeks to maintain covert surveillance on a location from the outside (stalking the target like a big cat stalking her prey), he is typically infiltrating the organization, finding its weaknesses from the inside.

I have spent a significant amount of time studying Mika's techniques, and I believe Mika has modified himself with a few unnatural augmentations that aid his infiltration of the personnel surrounding a specific target. First, I believe he has had phenotype adjustments made to his genetic profile (giving his aura a rather synthetic feel). From his ease with getting as close to his marks as he does, it would almost be necessary for him to have had the genewipe treatment, enabling him to touch whatever surface he wanted to and not worry that he was leaving behind genetic material that could be traced back to him. To make tracing genetic material back to him even more difficult, I suspect he has also benefited from the masque technique. This may have also given him the technological advantage of being a "blank slate," able to be reprinted with another genetic profile should his infiltration require it. He may have also used genetic therapies to remove his prints.

I remember a time not too long ago when adepts would not even think of introducing jeopardizing their connection to their magical abilities by introducing foreign augmentations into their bodies. Doing such a thing was once considered a waste of talent, not to mention a virtual blasphemy. Times have changed.

MIKA

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	6	5	5	6	5	6	4	7	5	5.6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 8/6

Skills: Assensing 3, Automatics 5, Blades 3, Climbing 5, Computer 4, Con 5, Data Search 4, Disguise (Cosmetic) 5 (+2), Dodge (Ranged) 4 (+2), Etiquette 5, Escape Artist 5, First Aid 3, Gymnastics 6, Hardware (Maglocks) 6 (+2), Infiltration (Motion Sensors) 6 (+2), Locksmith 4, Negotiations 5, Palming (Pickpocket) 6 (+2), Parachuting 3, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pilot Watercraft 2, Pistols 6, Running 5, Software 4, Swimming 4, Unarmed Combat 5

Knowledge Skills: Art Fences 6, Art Styles 5, Art History 6, Magical Security 4, Private Art Collectors 4, SOTA Security Systems 6, English 6, Lakota N, Spanish 2

Augmentations: Phenotype Adjustments: Genewipe, Masque, Print Removal

Qualities: Ambidextrous, Blandness, Geas (Ritual Geas), SINner, Wanted

Initiate Level: 1

Adept Powers: Astral Perception, Cloak 3, Combat Sense 2, Eidetic Sense Memory, Nimble Fingers, Spell Resistance 2, Traceless Walk, Voice Control, Wall Running

Metamagics: Flexible Signature

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 6), autopicker (Rating 6), binoculars (optical), 3 x C3 cleaners, camouflage suit, cellular glove molder (Rating 3), chameleon suit, endoscope, gas mask, gecko tape gloves, grapple gun, keycard copier (Rating 5), latex face mask, light stick, lockpick set, maglock passkey (Rating 5), microweave spider, microwire, miniwelder, myomeric rope, 4 x nanite disguise (large containers), periscope, rappelling gloves, sequencer (Rating 6), snakeskin coating, stealth rope w/ catalyst stick, tag eraser, 2 x thermite burning bar, wire clippers

Weapons:

2 x HK Urban Fighters w/ silencers [Heavy Pistol, DV 6eS, AP -half, SA, 10 (c), loaded with Stick-n-Shock ammo]

HK Urban Combat [Submachine Gun, DV 6eS, AP -half, SA/BF/FA, RC 2, 36 (c), with special internal hydraulic recoil compensation system, loaded with Stick-n-Shock ammo]

ceramic knife [Blades, Reach 0, DV 4P, AP 0]

Victorinox Memory Blade [Blades, Reach 1, 5P, -1]

PUCK

POSTED BY: ICARUS

VITAL STATS: PUCK

Age: Unknown	Height: 1.75 m
Weight: 64 kg	Hair: White/silver
Eyes: Grey	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: No

Let me start with the important thing: Puck is out. Free. I know he is. I don't have any direct proof, like a message from him or anything. I don't even have an eyewitness who saw him. What I have is more than just a feeling, though. There are certain communities I keep an eye on, watching the flow of information through those channels, seeing how people act, and I've sensed him. He's out there, behind the scenes, acting, recovering, preparing for whatever it is he's going to do next. I don't know what it's going to be, but all I can hope is that for once, his actions and his ideals will finally match up.

I know there are plenty of people here who don't like Puck and will never forgive him for what he did. I may not agree with them, but I see where they're coming from. Puck has been involved in some horrible things, and he doesn't exactly come across as apologetic about any of it. But once you understand why he did the things he did, and you see where he's trying to go, you get more sympathy for the guy. And while I'm not saying his intentions justify the things he did, the guy has been through a lot (including whatever it is that kept him away from us recently), and you can't see and experience everything he has without it affecting you in some pretty serious ways.

But maybe I should stop talking in generalities and get specific. Doing so will involve revealing some things about Puck that he has chosen not to share. He may not be happy with me for doing so, but that's a chance I have to take. Puck first came onto the scene as an otaku in the days before the wireless Matrix. He met an entity called Deus (an AI—you've heard of it, right?) and heard about Deus' idea of remaking the Matrix. That appealed to Puck—he has always seen the physical world as full of pain, limitations, and inequities, while the Matrix held out the possibility of freedom, equality, and even immortality through the preservation of the data that, as some would have it, is the complete underlying foundation of our consciousness.

- "As some would have it"? Does that mean you have an alternate theory about the nature of consciousness that you'd like to share with us?
- Slamm-0!

- Please don't try to take us down that road. Puck's story should give us enough to think about without us being sidetracked by metaphysics.
- Dr. Spin

Here's the thing some of us don't know, forgot, or refuse to accept—the children who became otaku were with few exceptions living lives that would make Dickensian urchins look glamorous. Puck came from nothing, survived the worst kind of hells most of could imagine, and somehow found his way out. He found the Matrix when it was wired, controlled, and generally inaccessible to those without means. In that Matrix, he found a tribe, the Deep Resonance, and a purpose. Deus offered more than a way for Puck to pursue his ideals—he offered him a place and a tribe. Puck is a man of ideals, and putting those ideals into action required guidance that he could not find before encountering Deus, a fact he could not admit to himself before a fateful encounter within the SCIRE host. Puck became one of Deus' Whites, his inner circle of otaku, and for a while he enjoyed himself carrying out Deus' orders and working toward the revolution the AI was planning.

Then the revolution erupted in Renraku Arcology, and Puck gained a better understanding of what Deus was planning—and what the cost would be. The things he saw in the arcology were seared into his mind, and he has told me that he can do more than just perfectly recall what he saw. He can feel it. Open an ARO, and he'll fill it with a picture from inside the arcology. If he doesn't like you, he'll give it to you in simsense. He carries these images with him everywhere he goes. He could not forget if he tried.

- He told you? He told you about what he saw? Sure he did. Because Puck is so damn forthcoming about his past.

Look, I'm not saying you're getting any of the key information wrong—it meshes with what I know—but I refuse to believe he just opened up and told you things about his past. That's not what he does.

- Slamm-0!
- That's not what he does with you.
- Icarus

Puck did not leave the Whites immediately, maybe because he did not have any other place to go. But the seeds of his departure were planted. Puck would like to think his experience with Deus made him wiser, and maybe he did, in fact, learn a thing or two, but only a few years after the arcology incident, he set about making the same mistakes. Once more, a charismatic leader sold him on a vision of remaking the Matrix. Once more, that leader spoke in generalities with which Puck could agree, while concealing the specifics that include things most people would think of as atrocities. And once more, Puck was sucked in. Pax, the leader of Ex Pacis, sold Puck on her ideals of an open, universal Matrix (while not sharing the full details of her Dissonant vision).

There are many, many people, including a number of JackPointers, who will never forgive Puck for his role in spreading the Jormungand virus. He has never asked for it, and never will—which I believe is to his credit. Attempting to explain his actions, or asking for forgiveness, would not change anything that happened. He knows that he is the person who did what he did, and he will have to live with the consequences of that. An apology doesn't make that any different.

- Bullshit (you all saw that coming, right?). Look, Puck's not taking responsibility for anything, and he sure as hell isn't living with the consequences of what he did, because he never admits what he did. How did he pay for what he did? What did he lose? Answer that, and then we can start talking about consequences.
- Slamm-O!
- Puck didn't go to jail or experience some other form of formal punishment, if that's what you're looking for, but he lost his tribe. He lost the only thing that had ever given him a sense of belonging in his whole life. He walked away from those connections because he knew what they were capable of. That is a significant loss.
- Arete
- I think we're missing something important—Icarus is confirming what Slamm-O!'s been saying for a while. Which means Slamm-O! is going to be extra insufferable.
- Netcat

That's Puck's past. There are things about the present that he's chosen to conceal, and since I believe he'll be returning to us shortly, I'll respect his wishes.

- *cough* technomancer *cough*
- Clockwork

I can say this—he doesn't have any regular employers, and he doesn't work with a regular team, but the people he works with speak highly of him. They say he's efficient, smooth, and always willing to help teams find ways to complete missions without resorting to gunfire. They say he's happy to talk about the work they're doing, but closed-mouthed about himself. But we all knew that.

They also say that, in person, his demeanor is somewhat twitchy. Haunted. You see, the reason Puck has been so committed throughout his life to a free and open Matrix is because the Matrix is his home. The flesh-and-blood reality where most of us do our living is a pale shadow of the reality that is most important to him, the one where he is fast and powerful and capable of anything he can envision. That was, for many years, where he was comfortable and at peace, where he belonged.

Puck also continues to operate by his own particular moral code, and he feels no obligation to explain it to those who do not understand it. On a recent run, before his disappearance, he led a virtual infiltration of a Saeder-Krupp node that supposedly held information on the trail of artifacts that had been crisscrossing the globe. There were two spiders who caused him particular problems—one with a barrage of Black IC, the other with much more mild IC designed to keep intruders out without doing



significant harm to them. By the time the mission was over, the spider who sent the Black IC was frustrated but otherwise fine; the other spider was lying on her floor, nearly flatlined from dumpshock, with the afterimage of the virtual flash that had been sent her way seemingly burned directly into her brain.

Puck's team members have no idea why the spiders earned two different treatments. One of them said Puck was interacting with both spiders during the combat, and theorized that perhaps the conversation with the second spider took a turn for the worse and let to her painful ejection from the Matrix.

- Puck got mad at someone because they said something mean to him? I find that hard to believe. He's been called every name in the book, multiple times, so he's got to be used to it by now. After all, if he hasn't risen to all the bait Slamm-O!'s been throwing his way, I doubt a simple spider would get under his skin.
- Netcat
- It could be a matter of honor. An antagonist who comes at you directly on the field of battle signals that they consider you to be their equal, and you are worth fighting. Someone who avoids combat (at least in as some interpret it) is refusing to acknowledge your worth as a foe. The strike by Puck could have been his way of firmly saying that he should be taken seriously.
- Kia
- Puck cares about honor about as much as he cares about insults. I'd bet something came out in his conversations with the two spiders that made him act the way he did, something not about him but rather about the way each spider viewed the Matrix and its basic nature. That's an issue he cares about, and one he would act on.
- Fastjack

While Puck still spends most of his time on the Matrix, it is not the place of peace and comfort it once was. One of the things Puck has always loved about the Matrix is that it never forgets, that the things and people stored there never fully go away. But that's come back to bite him in the ass, because Deus is still out there. The AI knows that one of his chief lieutenants has left him. I can't understand how an AI thinks, especially one like Deus, but it's likely Deus sees this as an abandonment, a betrayal. Puck, more than anyone else, knows how merciless Deus can be, and every moment he is on the Matrix, he is waiting for Deus to find him and initiate whatever revenge he has planned. Even worse than Deus, perhaps, is Pax. She is out there, hidden, but fully capable of taking action against him. Worse, she knows him better than almost anyone but the AI, and his death may not be sufficient for her. She knows that Puck is still out there, seeking something. He always said it was Deus who reached out to him, but I think it was Pax who made it happen, who made him into what he has become. Deus would likely just kill him, but Pax could turn him into a danger to himself, to us, and to everyone else on the Matrix.

- Hey, Deus! Looking for tips on tracking the bastard down? Call me!
- Slamm-O!
- I'm fairly certain the issue is not tracking Puck down, but rather deciding just what he wants to do with him.
- Icarus
- I'm fairly certain that the rumors of Deus still being out and about remain unsubstantiated, but that hasn't gotten in the way of the rest of the write-up here, so who cares?
- Snopes
- You left us hanging about your hook, Icarus. What makes you think he's free? And where has he been?
- Fastjack
- I left that hanging because that is not my story to tell. All I have to say, I said. But the story will be told soon.
- Icarus
- There is still something missing here. That is the question I think we all deserve to know the answer to: Why is he on JackPoint? What makes him so fucking special?
- Slamm-O!
- Normally I wouldn't abide the kid's drek, but I agree. I held my tongue when you told me he had been part of this group. I hoped that he would never come back. But ... He killed our friends, 'Jack.
- Bull
- I've seen the assessments—Renraku's, JTF-Seattle's, GOD's, and also Pax's and Deus' own. Icarus' assessment is pretty spot-on. What Icarus forgot to mention is that while Puck didn't have a regular team, regular clients, or any other constants in his life—he has us. The alternative speaks for itself. I've lived through two Matrix crashes.
- Fastjack

PUCK

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Res	Ess	Init	IP
2	5	5	2	4	5	5	6	6	6	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 9/11

Armor (B/I): 6/1

Skills: Blades (Knives) 2 (+2), Con 3, Cracking skill group 6, Cybertechnology 3, Dodge 3, Electronics skill group 6, Etiquette (Matrix) 2 (+2), Locksmith 2, Perception 4, Pistols (Hold-outs) 2 (+2), Running 2, Tasking skill group 5

Knowledge Skills: Artificial Intelligences 3, Combat Biking Leagues 3, Computer History 2, Matrix Architecture 5, Matrix Groups 3, Matrix Programs 6, Matrix Security Techniques 5, English N, French 2, Japanese 4, Spanish 3

Qualities: Bad Rep, Codeslinger, Photographic Memory, Technomancer

Living Persona: Firewall 6, Response 5, Signal 3, System 6

Complex Forms: Analyze 5, Armor 6, Attack 6, Black Hammer 6, Browse 4, Corrupt 4, Data Bomb 4, Decrypt 5, Defuse 4, ECCM 5, Edit 5, Encrypt 6, Exploit 6, Medic 3, Nuke 4, Purge 2, Scan 4, Sniffer 3, Spoof 5, Stealth 6, Track 5

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 6), FFBA shirt, 5 doses jazz, maglock passkey (Rating 6), medkit (rating 5), 5 doses psyche, SecureTech PPP shin guards, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (hold-out), 5 x stimulant patch (Rating 5), 5 x trauma patch, Victory Globetrotter Line Light Armor Clothing

Weapons:

Cougar Fineblade Short Blade [Blade, Reach —, DV 2P, AP -1]

Morrissey Élan [Hold-out, DV 4P or 6S(c), AP — or -half, SA, RC —, 5(c)]

RIGGER X

POSTED BY: QUILLON

VITAL STATS: RIGGER X

Age: 53 **Height:** 1.75 m
Weight: 61 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Black **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

- Rigger X has been warned in the past about digging up dirt on other members of this network and selling it to the highest bidder. Unsurprisingly, his choice to practice this habit on his teammates has resulted in at least one very pissed off razorguy by the name of Quillon, who contributed this piece on Rigger X to ShadowSea. Normally, whatever X had done, I wouldn't be mirroring this here. JackPoint takes care of its own. But since I'm putting this compilation on legendary runners together anyway—well, let's just say that Rigger X deserves to be included. In more ways than one.
- FastJack
- Wait a second, whose secrets has Rigger X been selling?
- Slamm-0!
- 'Jack?
- Slamm-0!

I realize that this exposé might seem like a shitty thing to do a fellow freelancer, but hear me out. All I'm really doing here is repaying a favor.

First, some background about me ... though to tell you about me, I must first tell you a bit about him. Rigger X has been in the business a long time now, but he hasn't fallen in with a regular team. Instead, he prefers to work with a handful of individuals who meet his standards of professionalism and mesh with his work ethic for a few months or a year at a time before abandoning them and moving on. He prefers to work with younger runners, people experienced enough not to embarrass him, but green enough for him to control. And believe you me, he wants to be in control. He calls the shots, but carefully avoids becoming the team's public face, preferring to minimize his exposure.

A year or so ago, Rigger X decided that my team met his standards. A local fixer put us together with him. He would work with us on certain conditions—one of which was that we didn't ask any questions about the last team he'd worked with—although those conditions didn't say anything about him harvesting our info to sell it to the highest bidder. Me and my guys had been working together for just a couple of years. Out of the group, I was probably the most experienced, with about eight years in the shadows. (As you probably know by

now, especially if you consider yourself to be in Rigger X's inner circle, I am a former member of the Tír Peace Force Special Forces, or as you know them better, the Ghosts. My parting of the ways with that organization was less than amicable, and there was little place in the legitimate workplace for someone with my skill set.) Initially, we were entirely enamored of the bastard. His rep on the street was rock solid, and we were sure we'd benefit from his years of experience.

The only problem was, there's a reason that the prick has gone this long in the business without making any lasting friends. I'm sure that I'm not the first teammate whose secrets he's sold for top nuyen. Well guess what, X, you asshole, if you're reading this: you're not the only one who can do some digging.

Rigger X—and let's call him by his real name, Genzo Watanabe, from now on—is a male Japanese human who was born in Chiba, Kyoto in April of 2020 to parents who were both MCT sararimen. Genzo was only nine years old when the Crash of 2029 happened. Both of his parents were killed during the Crash, on board an orbital shuttle that crashed because the air-traffic-control software guiding it was scrambled by the Crash virus. Genzo—both out of a sense of corporate debt to his family, and because his aptitude scores were remarkably high—was adopted by the company. He spent the next nine years in upscale corporate technical schools, and in his adolescence he was implanted with one of the first datajacks. When he graduated in 2038, due to his notable affinity for the Matrix and his strong interest in remote-operated physical systems—like security grids and drones—he was enrolled in a certification program to become a security specialist. By the time he was 21, he had a cushy corporate job as the chief security rigger—spider has become the popular term, and it fits—for a Mitsuhamas Automatronics plant in Kyoto. His nights were spent catching and killing shadowrunners just like us in his web.

- While I doubt that Rigger X's facility was getting attacked every night like Quillon seems to be implying here, he isn't kidding about the "killing" part. Mitsuhamas's zero-zone policy means that their security forces don't let any intruders leave their territory alive, ever.
- Hard Exit

Genzo's life was uneventful, spent bouncing around as a security consultant at various MCT facilities, until six years later, when he saw something he shouldn't have seen. He was working the security system at a MCT residential facility when he saw something he was never supposed to see. Genzo happened to glance at the camera feed to a room where the son of a Yakuza oyabun—one quite tied in with the MCT higher ups—got more than a little overzealous with a prostitute. The kind of overzealous where the girl had to be bagged and tagged later.

Whether Genzo intended to ever tell anyone what he'd witnessed turned out to be a moot point. The murderer himself

was not without his resources, and he showed up at Genzo's door one night, bringing a couple of veteran Yakuza kick artists along for the ride. Unfortunately for them, by that point Genzo had cultivated a very sophisticated level of paranoia for his age. The elaborate security system he'd set up in his apartment was triggered and wound up killing the oyabun's son.

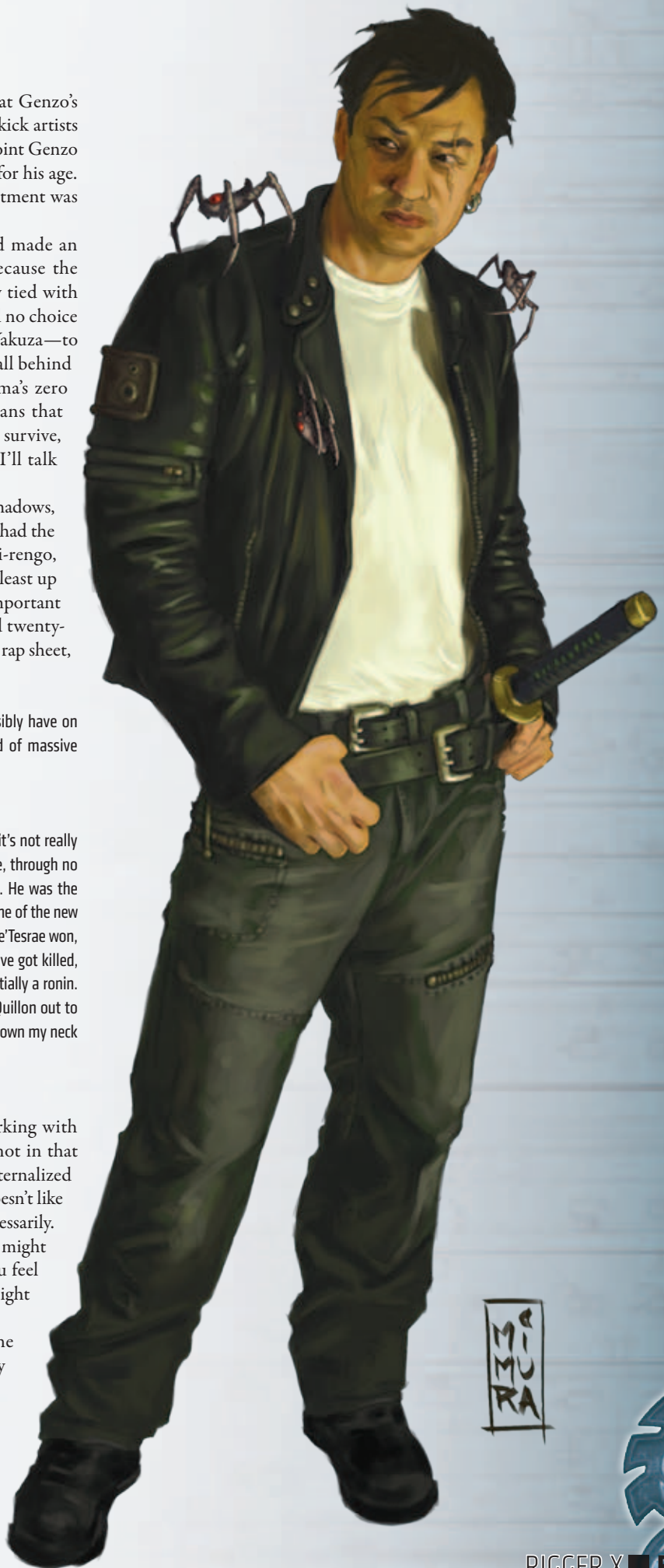
Through no real fault of his own, Genzo had made an enemy of the Yakuza in their own back yard. Because the particular group of Yaks he'd offended was closely tied with MCT, he'd put his career in jeopardy as well. He had no choice but to arrange—most likely with *another* group of Yakuza—to leave town, leaving his legitimate job, SIN, and life all behind him. He did take one thing with him—Mitsuhamas's zero zone policy. Applied to a shadowrunner, this means that Genzo has no intention of letting any of his enemies survive, ever. This is about as fucked up as it sounds, and I'll talk about it more later.

By the 2050s, Genzo had joined the life of the shadows, and he never looked back. In Seattle particularly he's had the protection of the independent-minded Shotozumi-rengo, who were willing (at least, for the most part, and at least up until this post) to turn a blind eye to the fact that important people in Kyoto were out for his blood. Genzo's had twenty-plus years to feel safe and secure and build his rep, his rap sheet, and his resume while spying and ratting on others.

- All right, I've got to ask. What the fuck could Rigger X possibly have on this Quillon guy that was bad enough to warrant this kind of massive overreaction?
- Jimmy No
- Just like the secret that Rigger X is apparently running from, it's not really that bad. Back in 2064, when civil war erupted in Tir Tairngire, through no fault of his own Quillon wound up backing the wrong horse. He was the Paladin of one of the old bosses and was sent to assassinate one of the new bosses. Unfortunately, the Council of Princes lost and Rinelle ke'Tesrae won, simple as that. The Prince that Quillon was oath-sworn to serve got killed, Quillon got labeled a terrorist, and he went into exile as essentially a ronin. My guess is that Rigger X found this out somehow and sold Quillon out to the Tir Peace Force. Having Tir Ghost commandoes breathing down my neck would probably sour my disposition a bit too.
- Thorn

I'm sure you've all had the misfortune of working with pacifists. "No-kill" Shadowrunners? I'm certainly not in that camp. But Genzo has the opposite problem. He's internalized MCT's zero-zone policy into his own M.O. Genzo doesn't like to leave anyone alive. I don't mean he's a psycho, necessarily. A psycho can't help it. Genzo? A better word for him might be sociopath, although if using that word makes you feel like you're throwing stones from a glass house, you might want to call him *thorough* instead.

Let me give you an example. We're on a job one night, right? Stealing a shipment of some nasty biowarfare shit from a Zeta-ImpChem warehouse by the docks. It's actually going well. Specifically, me and the troll (I could offer a more meaningful description, but you know the type) are doing the heavy lifting.



The hacker is monitoring outgoing traffic in case the shit hits the fan. Our shaman, she's providing astral overwatch. And Genzo is doing whatever he does. He's got the van warmed up, sure, but he's also doing his multi-tasking thing, watching the place from a dozen different angles. The mage has got us invisible, concealed, the whole nine. The hacker's got the gate controlled and the cameras looped. All we have to do is walk the thing out the front door and into the van. Null sheen, right? Wrong.

Something trips one of the motion sensors near the guard post. One of the ones we've been careful to avoid. One of the two orks from the guard booth unlimbers his stun baton and creeps over to check it out. He's about thirty meters from us. We freeze, set down the big canister of bad shit we have between us real quiet, and get as inconspicuous as we can. He's about to give it the all clear and head back to his post when he gets ripped apart by autofire from the rail drone on top of the perimeter fence. *Their* rail drone. I'm jacked up to eleven, about to bolt, looking for someone to stab, casting about for a second with my cybereyes when I see the other guard, slumped face down on the desk in a dark pool of crimson. That's when I figure it out.

Genzo tripped the motion sensor himself, remotely, by spoofing it. Then he took over the rail drone. Then he bullseyed the remaining guard himself with a silenced sniper rifle from the Optic-X that he had in orbit. Why, I asked later, had he done this, with no warning, no consultation with the rest of the team? No one was really that pissed, granted, because we had gotten out, and a fuck-up that doesn't compromise the op isn't a fuck-up at all.

"They might have seen us," he said, like that settled it. Again, I'm not afraid to kill ... when it's necessary. But that's two less people on the fucking planet basically just because he felt like it. "A matter of principle," he called it.

- Don't want to sound like a creampuff here, but I find myself agreeing with this Quillon guy here. That is a bit cold. Not to mention overkill.
- Stone
- What X did makes sense to me. You can't ever know, to a certainty, what any given guard might have seen or heard or smelled or pinged that'll come back around to get you and all of your chummers dead, or worse. Better safe than sorry. If the opportunity's there to eliminate some potential witnesses with absolute certainty, why the fuck not? We are not social workers.
- Jimmy No

In hindsight, none of what happened next should have surprised me. Genzo has no mercy, no remorse, and absolutely no scruples. It bears repeating that he is not a kill-crazy psychopath. In fact, I think his mile-wide murderous streak comes from caution as much as anything else. I've never met anyone else as hell bent on surviving, at any cost.

The entire time my team was working with him, Genzo was gathering intel on us. I mean, I can scarcely blame him for having the van wired. A rigger's van is his castle, after all. But he had bugs planted in our clothes. In our safehouses. Our vehicles. Let me put it this way, I'm just glad I didn't have any family in Seattle, or he'd probably have bugged them too. On a run, this kind of thing is an asset, a godsend. The guy knows what security drones each major company likes to use, for instance. And he's got at least one of each. So he paints them the appropriate colors, with the appropriate logos, spoofs their access IDs, and sends them into the facility. They get patched into the network, we get a complete picture of the interior, and from that recon we can form a plan. The guy is a wizard with security systems, and once we're inside a facility he can turn the cameras, the door locks, the lights, the air conditioning, everything to his advantage.

Talented or not, though, Genzo is a stone bastard, and I hope his friends from Kyoto catch up to him and give him what's coming to him. I don't appreciate being spied on and neither does the rest of my team. I have no reason to doubt that he had every intention of selling the intel he gathered on us to the highest bidder. I *know* he did, in my case. Now, we all have our own concepts of etiquette, but in my book this is just not done. You have to trust your team, and they have to trust you. Their private lives should be their own business, and they should stay out of yours.

After all, if we don't have "honor among thieves," than what have we got? So *caveat emptor*, those of you who would consider using Rigger X's services in the future, as well as those of you who might work with him. Don't expect that he'll let your skeletons rest in their closets.

- I don't know if anyone's giving this pile of drek enough credence to be interested in my side of the story, but if you are, here it is. Unlike Quillon, I can be brief. I'm not ashamed of the fact that I prepare contingencies in the event that any of my allies suddenly becoming an enemy. You would all be wise to do the same. Where Quillon's story diverges from the truth is that any intelligence on him I collected and shared, I did so under contract, and long after our partnership had been dissolved.

Quillon conveniently leaves out the reason why I stopped working with him. Namely, he's yet to learn that not every problem can be solved by turning your wired reflexes to 11 and rushing in sword-first. One day, his unprofessionalism is going to get his teammates killed, and I have no desire to go down with that ship. But this isn't a nursery, and I don't need to tell you what to think or how to do your jobs. On a related note, though, I do have a piece of action I'm looking to put together in the near future. PM me for details.

- Rigger X

RIGGER X

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
4 4(6) 5(8) 3 3 4 5(7) 3 5 2.03 9(12) 1(2)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 8/8

Skills: Athletics skill group 1, Automatics (Submachine Guns) 2 (+2), Blades 3, Con (Impersonation) 2 (+2), Dodge 2, Electronics skill group 3 (5), Electronic Warfare 4 (6), Etiquette (Corporate) 2 (+2), Gunnery 4, Hacking (Drones) 4 (6) (+2), Mechanics skill group 2 (4), Navigation 3, Perception 4, Pilot Aircraft (Remote Operation) 4 (8) (+2), Pilot Anthroform (Remote Operation) 3 (7) (+2), Pilot Ground Craft (Remote Operation) 4 (8) (+2), Pilot Watercraft 2 (6), Stealth skill group 3

Knowledge Skills: Security Design (Mitsuhamas) 5 (+2), Security Procedures (Mitsuhamas) 5 (+2), Street Drugs 3, Yakuza Politics 2, English 6, Japanese N,

Qualities: Addiction (Betameth, Mild), SINner, Enemy (The Four Oyabun).

Augmentations: Cerebral Booster (Rating 2), Control Rig (alpha-ware), Control Rig Boosters (Rating 2), Datajack, Fingertip Compartment (betaware), Muscle Toner (Rating 2), Nanohive (Rating 2, alphaware), Neural Amplifiers (Neocortical, Rating 2), Platelet Factories, Reaction Enhancers (Rating 2), Wired Reflexes (Rating 1, alphaware).

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 5), autopicker (Rating 6), 20 derms betameth, bike racing armor [w/ nonconductivity 6 and thermal damping 4], 10 clips APDS ammo, five clips stick'n'shock ammo, customized Transys Avalon commlink [Firewall 5, Signal 6, System 5, Response 6, w/ biometric reader, satellite link, sim module (modified for hot sim), skinlink, subvocal microphone, and trodes], Cyberspace Designs Dragonfly [Handling +1, Accel 3/15, Speed 30, Pilot 3, Body 1, Armor 1, Sensor 2, w/ C12 (HE Grenade) and Targeting 4 Autosoft], DocWagon contract (Gold, one year), five black duffle bags, electronics tool kit, equipment pouches and tool belts, fake SIN [Rating 5 w/ Rating 5 fake concealed carry, driver's and drone operation licenses], Ferret RPD 1X [Handling 0, Accel 10/20, Speed 60, Pilot 3, Body 1, Armor 3, Sensor 6, w/ improved sensor array, chameleon coating, weapon mount (normal, external, flexible, w/ Cavalier SafeGuard, and Targeting (Pistols) 3 Autosoft), form-fitting body armor half-body suit, gas mask, glasses [Rating 4 w/ low light, flare compensation, smartlink and image link], Ford LEBD-1 [Handling 0, Accel 5/20, Speed 80, Pilot 3, Body

3, Armor 9, Sensor 3 w/ mechanical arm, weapon mount (external, flexible, remote controlled w/ Ares HVAR), Improved Takeoff and Landing 2, Defense 4 and Targeting (Automatics) 4 Autosofts], GPS, handheld laser microphone (Rating 6), two Lockheed Optic-X drones [Handling 0, Accel 5/20, Speed 50, Pilot 3, Body 2, Armor 6, Sensor 2, w/ Improved Takeoff and Landing 2, chameleon coating, weapon mount (external, fixed, remote control with silenced Ruger 100), and Targeting (Longarms) 3 Autosoft], holo projector, jammer, directional (Rating 5), latex face mask, numerous mapsofts (Rating 6), medkit (Rating 6), Two MCT Fly-Spy minidrones [Handling +1, Accel 3/15, Speed 15, Pilot 3, Body 1, Armor 0, Sensor 2 w/ Improved Takeoff and Landing 2, and Maneuverability 2 Autosoft], modified GMC Chariot [Handling 0, Accel 10/25, Speed 40, Pilot 3, Body 2, Armor 2, Sensor 2, w/ weapon mount (concealed, fixed, remote control w/ Mossberg AM-CMDT), and Targeting (Longarms) 3 Autosoft], 20 derms psyche, respirator (Rating 5), 20 security RFID tags, 20 stealth RFID tags, Renraku Stormcloud [Handling -3, Accel 5/10, Speed 25, Pilot 3, Body 3, Armor 0, Sensor 3 w/ lighter than air, chameleon coating, and Clearsight 3 autosoft], Rover Model 2068 [Handling +1, Accel 20/35, Speed 140, Pilot 3, Body 13, Armor 20, Sensor 6 w/ anti-theft system, two small drone racks, two mini drone racks, ejection seats, GridLink override, interior cameras, rigger adaptation, rigger cocoon, and road strip ejector], two Shiawase Kanmushi microdrones [Handling +1, Accel 2/10, Speed 10, Pilot 3, Body 0, Armor 0, and Sensor 5 w/ gecko tips], Sikorski-Bell Microskimmer [Handling +1, Accel 2/10, Speed 10, Pilot 3, Body 0, Armor 0, and Sensor 5], 5 x stimulant patches (Rating 6), 2 x Stonebrooke Smokecloud microdrones [Handling +1, Accel 2/10, Speed 10, Pilot 3, Body 0, Armor 0, Sensor 2, w/ distraction equipment], 5 x tranq patches (Rating 6), survival kit, Suzuki Mirage [Handling +2, Accel 20/50, Speed 200, Pilot 3, Body 6, Armor 12, Sensor 3 w/ anti-theft system rigger adaptation], tag eraser, wire clippers, Wuxing Crimson Samurai [Handling +1, Accel 15/30, Speed 100, Pilot 3, Body 4, Armor 12, Sensor 3 w/ weapon mount (external, remote controlled turret w/ GE Vindicator Minigun)]

Programs: Analyze 5, Armor 4, Biofeedback Filter 4, Browse 5, Command 5, Decrypt 5, ECCM 5, Edit 5, Encrypt 5, Exploit 5, Scan 5, Sniffer 5, Spoof 5, Stealth 5, Track 5

Weapons:

Monofilament sword [Reach 1, DV 5P, AP -1 w/ personalized grip]

HK MP-5 TX [SMG, DV 5P, AP -4, SA/BF/FA, RC 2 (3), 20(c), w/ barrel reduction, concealable holster, ext. smartlink, gas-vent 2 system, sound suppressor and APDS ammo]

SERRIN SHAMANDAR

POSTED BY: LYRAN

VITAL STATS: SERRIN SHAMANDAR

Age: Over 50	Height: 1.94 m
Weight: 84 kg	Hair: Grey
Eyes: Grey	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: Yes (Hermetic Magician)

Serrin Shamandar has taken a few trips in and out of the shadows. During his first foray, his leg was badly damaged on a job for Renraku, which pulled him from the shadows into an only slightly more legal working relationship with a few British nationals. He worked on almost every continent during that first period as a runner, and he developed an impressive résumé of well-planned and well-executed operations. Early in his career he was a planner first, trying to out-think rather than out-gun (or in his case out-cast) his opposition. His early grimoire consisted mostly of detection and illusion spells, many of them formulated by Serrin himself. He was also well known for his conjuring skills, and more specifically with the conjuring of watcher spirits (though I have no idea why anyone would focus on that particular type of spirit).

Of lesser note but still significant is his skill with the submachine-gun, the Ingram Smartgun X being his usual weapon of choice. Serrin was one of those mages who sometimes slipped into the wannabe-street-sammy category, though the gun's sound suppression also fit well with his more subtle approach. He has shown some skill with other small arms as well. He has no known cybernetic systems, though, which makes sense as I don't see the guy as the type who would buy into a smartlink while never bothering to get his leg fixed.

After his leg injury, and during his slightly more legitimate employment, he was linked to the successful apprehension of a "Jack the Ripper" copycat in '54. He worked in the employ of a minor British noble and earned himself a nice little piece of a small island off the coast of Wales, where he spent most of his time. The island was a sweet little retirement spot, but instead of fading into the quiet life, Shamandar was dragged back into the troubled world by Luther von Hayek. Word on the street is that Von Hayek was an elven nosferatu, infected with the Bruckner-Langer strain of HMHVV. Whether that's true or not, he was batshit crazy and went after Shamandar because the elf carried a unique gene known as RA-17. After jousting with von Hayek for a while, Shamandar and a small team of associates eventually took care of him. The details of what they did aren't known, but no one has seen or heard from von Hayek since '55.

Serrin married a half-breed Xhosa girl named Kristen and managed to settle down again, but he was pulled back into the

world in '57. Street tales tell of a near-world-ending incident involving the Vatican, Renraku, and a reclusive elf known only as Leonardo. As near as I can tell, the elf was really into following in his namesake's footsteps when it came to inventing things, and some of his inventions could have played havoc with the Matrix. The Crash that happened in '64 could have gone down back in '57 had Serrin and company not successfully navigated some pretty tricky waters.

After this incident he managed to stay pretty clean until '64. Honestly, the man has tried to retire so many times he reminds me of those sport stars who bounce in and out of retirement every year. This latest return to the shadows had a dark twist, though. When his wife's plane went down during the Crash of '64, Shamandar changed drastically. A week after the Crash, he burned down his cottage on the island and disappeared.

- And this is where the bedtime story gets spooky. From this point until about 2070 it's really all just speculation and word of mouth. So I want everyone to remember that Serrin Shamandar is a legend in his own right, and anything you say about him should carry the proper amount of respect.

Having said that—Serrin Shamandar disappeared for over five years. During that same time a street myth formed about someone who went by the name of Ire. No one is sure if everything credited to Ire was actually his doing or if people were just in the habit of attaching nasty deeds to this faceless name. No one knew who Ire was because Ire never left anyone alive to tell the tale.

Now, people began to notice coincidences. Ire and Shamandar act like Superman and Clark Kent—when one of them is around, the other is always gone. When Ire goes dark after his latest crime spree, Shamandar re-emerges. When Shamandar goes back into hiding, Ire springs into action. Plus, both men have a certain gift for summoning watcher spirits.

That's all very circumstantial, of course. I understand that there's likely to be speculation as this post continues, and that people are going to make their own connections. But remember the things Shamandar has accomplished, and show the proper respect.

- Fastjack

Things get a little unclear about Shamandar from this point on, so I've gathered some comments from people who claim to have had first-hand contact with him. First up is a runner named Streak:

I knew Serrin when his wife died. I saw the ghost that strolled those beaches near their home. He would walk the same path for hours on end until his footprints were packed so hard in the sand that even the changing tide didn't wash them away. He was a dark storm rolling and building force, like a tropical low slowly rising to a hurricane.

Some people say he burned down his cottage after it happened, but he didn't just burn it. He incinerated it. I know this because I was bloody there. I'd come to see a friend in mourning, and I left disturbed by what had become of this once caring man. The last time I saw him he was out by the water talking to a mutual friend, Merlyn, though actually it was more like he was being talked at by Merlyn. Serrin was already mostly gone.

I was passing through the house to grab a bag of gear I'd left there for safekeeping. I didn't figure I'd be back any time soon. I'm maybe a handful of

meters out the front door when the whole house went up in flames. The whole sodding house! Went up so quick the rush of air pulled me toward the door. No blast, just fire. Craziest thing I've ever seen. I went on the defensive and figured it was an attack on Serrin, so I booked it around back, but the only person there was Merlyn. He was staring at the blaze in amazement, and Serrin was nowhere in sight.

Next up is a runner named Wolf who has some knowledge of how Ire works:

I spent a few years working side jobs for a guy in the Star before they lost the Emerald City. Had me investigate things they weren't allowed to dig too far into. I did two Seattle investigations, both suspected to be Ire's work. The first was a pretty straightforward job, burnt-out warehouse where a team of runners had lived in their own little criminal commune. The Star did their investigation, a quick walk-through followed by the old sweep-it-under-the-rug maneuver. No one wanted to shell out resources to investigate them. Problem was the guy I was working for was actually related to one of the deceased, so he wanted answers.

The warehouse was close to the docks, and Ire needled past the dock security. I picked up the signature of some illusions in a nearby alley where a girl had been found by a sec guard. According to the guard's statement, the girl appeared out of nowhere when he went to check the alley after hearing a scream. The area had signs of spirit activity, probably concealment. This all sounds fine, but the girl was found with an eight-inch slash on her thigh and an ice pick through her throat. Guard spent his time trying to save her, and the warehouse went up in flames. A maniac, one who couldn't plan, would have offed the guard, but Ire was methodical. He knew he'd have more time if the guard was busy trying to be a hero.

The second site I looked into was an apartment building owned by a long-time Vory soldier. The soldier was as retired as the Vory allows anyone to be, and again the Star didn't want to put the resources out to investigate a criminal's murder. My guy received a nice little under-the-table bonus from his Vory contacts, and he spread some of it my way to help find out who did it.

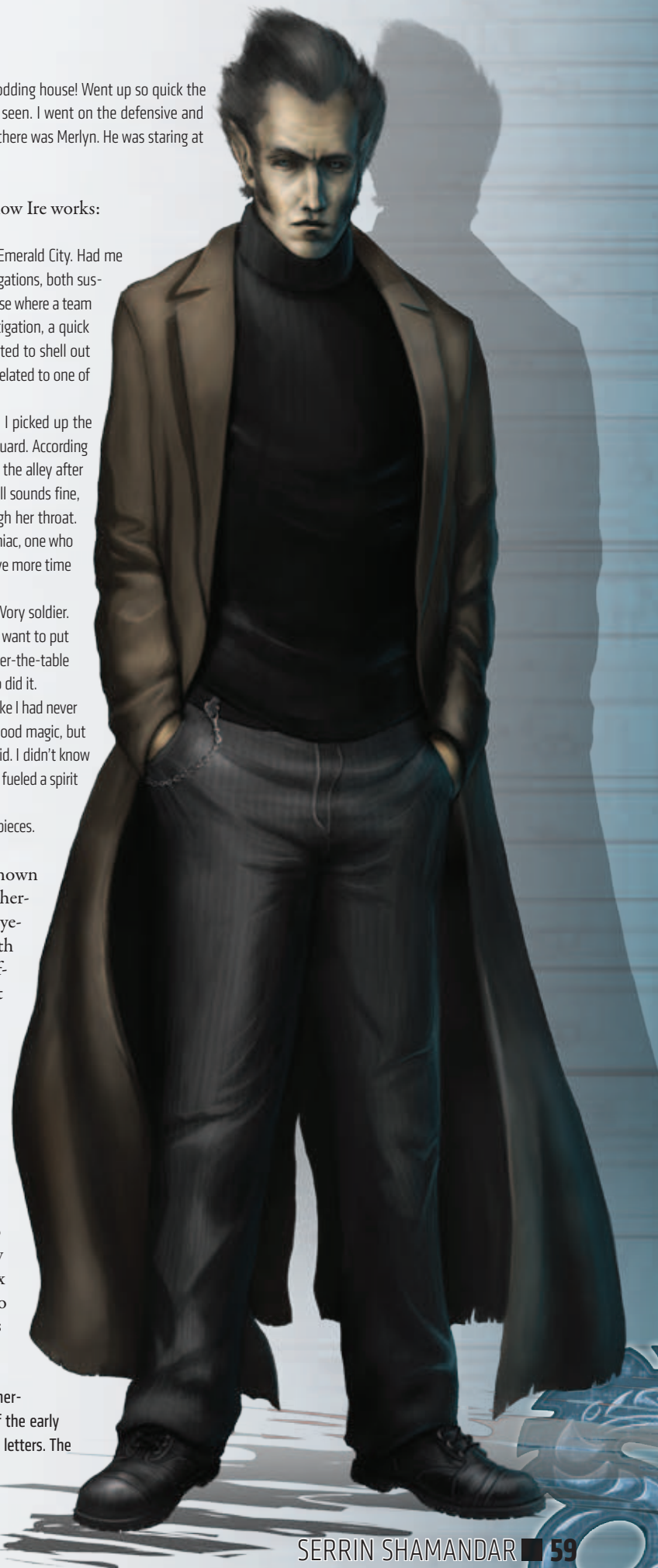
I slipped in and scoped the place out. I found a signature and a stink on the astral like I had never seen before. I wasn't familiar with certain aspects of magic back then, particularly blood magic, but the astral around the crime scene actually smelled like blood. At least the first floor did. I didn't know what it was at the time but now I know it as the scent of summoning and sacrifice. Ire fueled a spirit with the blood of the target's daughter. The spirit then did the dirty work.

Twisted bastard let the bloody visage of a Vory soldier's own daughter rip him to pieces.

During his first stint in the shadows, Shamandar was well known for his detection and protection skills, as well as his mastery of watcher-summoning techniques, but his second time around has been an eye-opening experience for a number of individuals who had dealt with him previously. He vastly increased his magical powers through self-initiation and shifted some of his gifts to a more offensive style. Street rumor also indicates that after his wife's death and his change of styles he also gained an understanding of and skill with blood magic. Much like the supposed connection between Ire and Shamandar, no solid proof has ever been established that the elf is using blood magic. If it's true, that brings up the possibility that turning Shamandar in to the Draco Foundation could result in a nice bounty.

The Ire/Shamandar connection has gained traction due to the mysteries surrounding Ire and his work. Ire has earned himself a dark, yet methodical, reputation. Wetwork, DOA bounty hunting—you name it, if it involved killing he was near the top of the list of people to call. No one knew anything about him, though, except for his brutality and thoroughness. He took all his contracts through the Matrix using a generic icon, and on the job he didn't leave anyone behind to identify him. He operated for several years before the first speculations surfaced about his connection to Shamandar.

- There is no way that Serrin Shamandar, the gimp elf with the mad watcher-summoning fetish, is the same guy as Ire. Ire is a street myth. Reminds me of the early days of Teachdaire. Hell, Ire probably is Teachdaire; just look at those last three letters. The old Irish hitter probably just wanted deniability. I call bullshit.
- Riser



- Ire's MO is different than Teachdaire's. Teachdaire somehow befuddled all the witnesses. Ire killed everyone who ever saw him.
- Fianchetto
- Ever heard of the Path of the Wheel? Elves walk different paths in their lives. Serrin could have moved along the path. Ire may have just been his warrior path. And also, Teachdaire was already a legend back when Serrin was limping around summoning astral eyeballs.
- Frosty
- All that I can say is that if these two are the same guy, Serrin must have suffered a mental break. Ire would be a manifestation of his anger and resentment at the unyielding truths of the world. The man stopped an earlier Crash just to have it happen again later and take his wife. I understand the break.
- Kay St. Irregular

Whether he was hidden away in a cave somewhere or living as Ire, Shamandar walked a dark path all those years. That is, until he met a young elven girl whose life also changed on that same fateful day back in 2064. It was not a loss like Shamandar's—this elven girl had gained powers she did not understand, and with those powers came persecution. The girl was a technomancer, and the story goes that Serrin saved her from an angry mob but lost consciousness due to his spellcasting efforts in rescuing her.

It didn't help that he was likely already quite drained from his work down the road. Less than a block away there was a Yakuza hangout burning to the ground and full of dead bodies. This hit was placed on the shoulders of one man, Ire, because of the scrawl on the alley wall that read "wrong place, wrong time," which is the dark runner's calling card. This total annihilation of a major group of criminals went down right before Shamandar reappeared nearby to save the young technomancer.

- Not to make this epic tale seem less cool, but I'm not so sure he was saving that elf. A mob of people a half block down from a major crime makes for a lot of potential witnesses. I think he was just "casing his brass" as they say.
- Stone
- No matter the reason, he awoke a changed man.
- Netcat
- Anyone think it's not the best idea to post this stuff here about the connection between Serrin Shamandar and Ire? Whether it's true or not isn't the point. The Yaks might come after an innocent man just to find out.
- /dev/grrl
- No worries on that front grrl. The Yaks already tried back in '72. The unspoken connection between the two is pretty well established on the streets. Let's just say that with Serrin Shamandar, raising his Ire is not such a good idea, even if you are one of the largest crime syndicates in the world.
- Hard Exit
- I still call bullshit.
- Riser

This encounter started Shamandar on a slow journey back to his old self, but the legend of Ire and their connection had gained him a new reputation on the streets. And it was not just the streets of Seattle that had faced Ire; the shadows all over the world knew that name. His dark fugue had changed him from a legendary information-gathering specialist to a legendary predator.

The girl whose life he saved, and who saved his in return, was none other than our little Netcat. She pushed Shamandar to get onto JackPoint, but so far he has stayed away. Part of the reason is his distrust for the Matrix. He's done a few jobs for some Luddite groups since coming back on the scene, and he likes nothing better than to trash all the tech that gets in his way instead of worrying about contracting a hacker.

- All right, so it's out on the table. I met Ire, and Shamandar, and I survived. Barely. But let me be clear on one thing. He didn't save me. I had everything under control. And while he changed, he certainly didn't change overnight.
- Netcat
- Of *course* he didn't save you. You were just fine, I'm sure.
- Slamm-O!

I was. I wasn't being attacked by the mob; I was being followed because I had convinced all of them that I could save their tech from the technomancers. (I'll admit I may have been a bit manipulative at times.) I have this little band ready to witness my skills and then fork over some good cash, and then the building down the street just explodes.

The crowd shifts their interest, and I slide to the back of the group. I wasn't being attacked, but I've seen my share of angry mobs so I was getting ready to be out of sight if trouble came. I had a nice view down the street, and from the fire and smoke out walks a shadowy figure. The shot would have made a great trideo, but I wasn't recording. An instant after the figure steps out, the crowd drops. Every single one of them just buckles at the knees and collapses to the ground. No screams, no nothing.

The figure makes a few more steps, stumbles, raises a hand to his head and then collapses. I figure a scene like that had to mean the guy was one tough hombre. A nice guy to know, maybe, so I dragged him off to a little safehouse I had nearby.

When he woke up he wasn't exactly sure where he was and kept calling me Kristen. I let him stay for a while. We got to talking, and I think the old guy developed a little thing for me. I helped him work through some of his issues, only a few of the many, but enough to get Serrin Shamandar back in the shadows and out of the dark.

- Netcat

During Shamandar's latest round in the shadows, street gossip indicates that he is not fully utilizing his most dangerous skills. The guy has a lot of baggage and obviously feels he has some debt to repay for his actions between '64 and '71. A lot of his work of late has been self-initiated, which is just as well since the corps have shied away from him lately due to worries about his mental instability. At least, that's the official line. The real deal is that they know that if they need to off him after a run gone bad, he has too many skills and friends to allow that to happen easily.

- At the moment, most Johnsons don't want to hire Shamandar. He's got a well-deserved bad reputation for turning pay meets into bloodbaths when he gets double-crossed, or just *thinks* he got double-crossed.

Shamandar got hired in Northern Europe to do a job out at sea. The job was to get out to a cargo liner and shut down comms at a specific time. The Johnson had heard Shamandar had a reputation for blasting tech and usually worked alone, so he thought it was the perfect fit. Plus, a single guy comes cheaper than a team.

The elf does the job, hits the ship out to sea with some spirit aid. No sooner does the comm system go down than the cargo liner gets a request for identification from a Polish naval vessel. Naturally, the liner can't send any reply, so the cargo liner gets fired on. Serrin gets clear, again aided by the spirits, and makes it back to shore.

Turns out the ship was a Maersk liner full of goods, and ESUS dropped a word to the Polish navy that a commandeered Russian cruiser would be sailing through the area. One corp was playing a game against another, with Serrin there to help facilitate things.

This means that at the final meeting, Mr. Johnson finds himself facing a very angry elf. Ire comes out, and the Johnson ends up as the frayed rope in a tug-o-war between a fire spirit and a water spirit. There are plenty of other stories like that out there.

- Rigger X

The corps love us when we are amoral mercenaries out looking for a buck, but as soon as you start seeing situations in terms of right and wrong instead of just chasing after stacks of nuyen, they worry that their money can't keep you in line. Shamandar's at that point and beyond. The end result is, he's lived the life that would make one hell of a trid show, but down here on the streets it's tough being a legend.

Just a warning to anyone out there who reads this and deals with Shamandar. The old Serrin, the one from way back, was nice, and the modern elf is may be even better, but don't ever rile him to try and get a look at the troubled Serrin, a.k.a. Ire. I knew a lot of people who thought they were tough who wanted to hear the infamous "Wrong place, wrong time" quote who never lived to tell the tale. There is a monster inside Serrin Shamandar. He's caged for now, but he will never be tamed.

- Shamandar's making money somewhere else, and I'm pretty sure I know how. Denver has recently seen an increase in "Men in Black" sightings all over town. They make great eyes and ears as well as message couriers. I've assensed them, and they read like watcher spirits, but they aren't dumb floating eyeballs. I think Serrin's behind them and making money on the info they gather.
- Stone

SERRIN SHAMANDAR/IRE

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	5	4	4	9	5	5	6	10	5	6.0	9	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 8/3

Skills: Arcana 6, Archery (Bows) 2 (+2), Assensing 6, Astral Combat 5, Athletics skill group 2, Automatics (SMG) 4 (+2), Banishing 5, Binding 4, Blades 4, Computer 2, Con 3, Counterspelling (Combat) 5 (+2), Data Search 3, Demolitions 3, Dodge 5, Enchanting 3, Escape Artist 2, Etiquette (Magic) 6 (+2), Exotic Ranged Weapon (Netgun) 2, First Aid 3, Infiltration 5, Instruction 2, Medicine 1, Navigation 3, Negotiation 5, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft (Bike) 3 (+2), Pistols 3, Ritual Spellcasting 3, Shadowing 3, Spellcasting 7, Summoning (Watchers) 6 (+2), Survival 3, Throwing Weapons 3, Unarmed Combat (Carromeleg) 4 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Area Knowledge (Bogota) 2, Area Knowledge (Cape Town) 3, Area Knowledge (Caracas) 3, Area Knowledge (Denver) 2, Area Knowledge (Karavan) 1, Area Knowledge (London) 3, Area Knowledge (New York) 1, Area Knowledge (Rhine-Ruhr) 2, Area Knowledge (Seattle) 4, British Nobility 1, Geography 2, Law Enforcement Procedures 4, Magical Phenomenon 5, Magical Theory 6, Metaplanes 3, Parobotany 3, Parazoology 3, Spirits 5, Street Gangs 3, Underworld Politics 3, English N, Esperanto 3, German 3, Latin 2, Sperethiel 3

Qualities: Aptitude (Spellcasting), Exceptional Attribute (Charisma), Focused Concentration (2), Magician, Martial Artist (Carromeleg, 2), Murky Link, Spirit Affinity (Watchers)

Initiate Grade: 6

Metamagics: Centering, invoking, masking, quickening, sacrifice, shielding

Spells: Agony, Chaotic World, Combat Sense, Confusion, Demolish Cameras, Demolish Commlinks, Demolish Guns, Detect Enemies, Detect Guns, Detect Magic, Enhance Aim, Fireball, Heal, Hot Potato, Improved Invisibility, Increase Reflexes, Mana Barrier, Physical Mask, Ram Computer, Resist Pain, Shatter, Stim, Stun Ball, Stun Bolt, Wreck Commlink

Bound Spirits: Spirit of air (Force 8, 2 services), spirit of earth (Force 6, 4 services), spirit of fire (Force 8, 3 services), spirit of man (Force 10, 4 services), spirit of water (Force 6, 3 services), 9 SS watcher spirits (Force 6, 6 hours)

Gear: 80 rounds of APDS ammo, 80 rounds of EX-explosive ammo, 100 rounds gel ammo, 200 rounds of regular ammo, 100 rounds of stick-n-shock ammo, commlink (Fairlight Caliban, upgraded Response to 5, with Novatech Navi OS, upgraded Firewall and System to 5), contacts (smartlink), 4 datachips, fake gun license (Rating 3), fake SIN (Rating 3), 4 x combat fetishes, 6 x detection fetishes, 3 x healing fetishes, 2 x illusion fetishes, 4 x manipulation fetishes, medkit (Rating 4), form-fitting body armor (half suit), radio signal scanner (Rating 5), respirator (Rating 5), 20 standard RFID tags, spellcasting focus (Rating 4, pocket watch), summoning focus (Rating 4, pocket watch chain), Synergist Business Line Longcoat, white noise generator (Rating 4)

Programs: Agent (Rating 4), Analyze 4, Browse 4, Command 4, Edit 4, Pocket Hacker

Maneuvers: +2 on Surprise tests when initiating an attack (2)

Weapons:

Colt Manhunter [Heavy Pistol, DV 6S(e), AP -half, SA, RC 0, 16(c), concealable holster, laser sight, silencer, smartgun, stick-n-shock ammo]

Ingram Smartgun X [SMG, DV 5P, AP -5, BF/FA, RC 3 (4), 32(c), w/ gas-vent 2, personalized grip, smartgun, retractable stock and APDS ammo]

Vibro sword [Reach 1, DV 6P, AP -2]

2 flash bang grenades [grenade, DV 6S, AP -3, blast 10m radius]

2 frag grenades [grenade, DV 12P(f), AP+5, Blast -1/m]

2 high explosive grenades [grenade, DV 10P, AP -2, blast -2/m]

4 thermal smoke grenades [Grenade, blast 10m radius]

Note: Shamandar summons a unique form of Watcher spirits, SS Watchers. He can also summon standard watcher spirits.

SS WATCHERS

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	M	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
1	1	1	1	F	F	F	F	F	0	F	F+1	2 (3)

Skills: Assensing, Dodge, Infiltration, Perception, Shadowing

Powers: Concealment, Confusion, Influence, Materialization, Sapience, Search

Note: These spirits all have the same appearance: classic man in black. They use Infiltration + Intuition instead of Agility.



THE KILLING GAME

BY MALIK TOMS

The sixth body was the worst. Police found it past the halogen flush of St. Louis in a small brown house far enough from everything to still be called a cabin. The sky was alive with spinning red and blue lights. Rain fell in sheets over the weathered strip of dirt road that led toward civilization.

“You don’t get many of these out here.” Detective Sam McIntosh ran his fingers over his knuckles again and again, thinking. He’d been the first one to go inside since forensics had cordoned off the area.

“We don’t get *these* at all, sir.”

The victim was male. The amount of damage done to him made guessing his age difficult. “The killing blow appears to have been a knife slash to the carotid artery.” The blunt-nosed forensics investigator moved his thumb from the left side of his neck to the right. He was wearing a baggy dark blue jumpsuit that read **Crime Scene Investigations** and, beneath it in smaller print, **KE—St. Louis**. “Our killer let the victim bleed out, and then he really went to work on him.”

Sam knelt by the body. The killer had done most of the damage to the victim’s body and face. Arms and legs were left alone.

“We found what looked like some sort of tarot card in his left hand.” The investigator passed a sandwich bag to the detective. Inside was yellowed tarot card, its features smeared with blood.

“Run it for prints at the lab.” He handed it back to the investigator, more interested in the room than what had been found on the victim. The place was older than anywhere he’d ever been. Weirder too. Someone, presumably the victim, had painted the floor with arcane symbols. The walls were coated in a thick blue-green moss he’d never seen before.

“What is all this?” he asked.

“It’s a type of Awakened moss. The retailers call it GloMoss. When an Awakened mana presence is near it, like a spirit or a magic user, it starts to glow. Some people build it into their security systems, but it’s relatively rare and expensive. Our victim must have been concerned about magic to have this much moss around.”

Sam took another glance around the shabby surroundings. The structure the victim lived in didn’t deserve to be called a cabin. It had four walls and a roof, but little about it appeared to be up to code. Nothing in here said money, except for the moss and the leather-bound books on the shelves opposite the bed.



“Clear the room,” he said. “I want some time alone with the space.”

The tech nodded and left.

The victim, or whoever owned the cabin, had spent a lot of money procuring real books. They were lined up in three neat rows on plastiwood shelves that sagged under the weight. Something tingled at the edge of his psyche, a presence among the books he hadn't noticed before. Instinctively the detective touched the leather spine of each book, tugging on them slightly. He found what he wanted on the second shelf. He went to one knee and tugged. The spine said *Neuromancer*, but the weight was different than the rest. Lighter. He pulled the book off the shelf and opened it. The pages were hollowed out in the middle to create a makeshift secret compartment. A small data tablet was nestled inside.

Sam McIntosh reached out with his mind the way he'd done a handful of times since the Crash. Since the night his brother, Officer Erik McIntosh died; the night Sam abandoned the life of a do-nothing net-troller. Sam's consciousness brushed up against the device, calling to it. The data tablet responded, thrumming to life. The device was tagged to a Dr. Johansen of the Horizon Group. The location ID for his last entry read Kanpur, India. It was all shorthand notes. He couldn't make sense of it, but perhaps with some time—

The strange moss started to glow again. Sam felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He spun around, yanking his gun from its holster. Someone was kneeling over the body. An Amerindian dressed like a shaman in full headdress. Sam yelled, “Freeze!”

The Amerindian was already frozen, still peering down at the body.

“Step away from the body very slowly.”

The man turned to look at him. The shaman was naked from the chest up and didn't seem bothered by the unseasonable cold. The age lines etched into his face told a different story than the muscular upper torso. He made no effort to move.

Sam shouted, “Now! Stand up slowly and step away from the body.”

The shaman stood up very slowly and vanished into thin air.

Sam lowered his gun for a moment, bewildered. Was it real? Had it happened? Since the Crash he'd often see things that weren't really there, at least not in the physical world. Things like his dead brother. Things he couldn't explain, the same way he couldn't explain how he'd come to have his new abilities. He'd read the reports on the Matrix. He knew what he was now, knew how people felt about what he was, and he hid his secret.

Indeed, the presence may have been another ghost in the machine, but he didn't feel the shaman the way he felt the data tablet. He couldn't reach out with his mind and touch the man, but the man had been physically there, right? It could only mean one thing.

“Is everything okay, sir?” The CSI tech stood in the doorway, his ferret eyes darting between Sam's un-holstered weapon and the ground, never daring to make eye contact.

“Yes. No. We just had a breach. I think it was a spirit. Call headquarters and let the shift commander know we're going to need a mage down here.”

“Sir, the shift commander is already here. He's bringing someone to the scene.”

Sam nodded, surprised, and climbed to his feet. He holstered his weapon. The data tablet found its way into his pocket. From

the doorway he could see a black American moving towards his crime scene.

"Son of a bitch. Feds?" The black car eased to a stop just outside of the taped off area. Two figures stepped out. He recognized the driver as the shift commander from his precinct. The other was cloaked in a trench coat. A thick black cowl shielded her head from the rain.

Sam stepped off the rickety porch and walked out to meet them. He said, "Sir, we had a breach a moment ago. I think it was a spirit. I've never seen one live before, but, Christ, it just up and vanished right before my eyes. It was interested in the body."

If the captain heard any of it, he pretended not to.

"What's the story, Captain Barber, sir?" Sam focused on the other individual approaching him. She pulled down her cowl and let the rain run off her close-shaved scalp. Crow's feet had set in at the corners of her eyes and mouth, making the Amerindian woman more severe than she would have been anyway. Her face had a hardness to it, like someone who'd seen too much to ever fully relax.

Sam unconsciously reached out with his mind. Her cyberware was minimal and extremely sophisticated. Her PAN was the latest software Ares had to offer. He breezed past the security, thinking of it as an intrusion only after he was inside. The network of interconnected hardware and software was tied to a name: Anne Ravenheart, colonel, Ares Firewatch. There was more. Her network was tethered to threads of input/output data twining deep into the Matrix. He climbed the tether, letting his mind reach further into her PAN, back up through her link to where the data led him.

Something met him there with a force he didn't expect. It looked like a Raven, its black wings tinged with flame. The raven squawked loudly, unsheathing diamond claws. Whatever the thing was, it wasn't a security routine. It felt like a sprite, but Ravenheart wasn't like him. It shouldn't be there. Sam withdrew quickly.

All of this transpired in an instant.

He blinked, refocusing his awareness on the physical world. The colonel was staring at him. She stared a moment longer. A smile played on her lips.

The Captain cleared his throat. He said, "Detective, this is Colonel Anne Ravenheart. She's Firewatch, from the Office of Special Investigations. She's been heading up an investigation of something like what you've got in there. She thinks that ours might be part of the same pattern."

Sam thought of the unusual tarot card wedged in the victim's hand, "You think this is a serial killing, colonel?"

"I think KE wants to make sure that it isn't, detective. Do we understand one another?" She had a strong voice, like a woman born to giving orders. When he met her green eyes he found something hard there, too.

"Who's been over the scene?"

"A couple of CSI guys and myself," Sam said. Ravenheart moved past him toward the crumbling cabin and the moss that had gone dark again.

"Get everyone out. Nobody else goes in until I'm done."

Captain Barber shrugged and started back for the car. The detective couldn't hide his surprise. This could be a major case, a career maker, and Barber was giving it away like three-day-old bread. Sam glared after him. The man seemed cowed by Ravenheart, but that made no sense. Sam knew corporate law. Firewatch was a special-operations detachment. They couldn't supercede a state law-enforcement investigation, not after Chicago. Not without clearance from the district supervisor or a representative of the state.

Chicago. Suddenly he remembered who she was. Colonel Ravenheart brushed past him. He tried her PAN again, but this time he couldn't override her security. He released his mind to the Matrix, focusing his thoughts on her name. The files appeared instantly. Old ones. Public ones. Keywords flashed before his eyes. Chicago. Cermak Blast. Bug Spirits.

She was at the door when he said, "Ma'am, I can't let you in there!"

"It's colonel, and I don't think you have a choice."

"I am sorry, colonel, but I can't allow that. You really are out of your jurisdiction here. Besides, we've had a breach already. I need to lock down the scene until we can get our mage down here. I'm sorry, but its procedure."

"We both know I have the necessary jurisdictional authority, and I don't think the duty mage will be required tonight." She smiled and ran her finger along the doorframe. The moss-covered walls inside sparked like St Elmo's fire.

He paused and steeled himself. "It's still my scene, colonel. I'm walking in with you."

Ravenheart chuckled to herself and walked inside. After a moment, Sam followed. If Ravenheart minded, she didn't show it. She started with the bookshelf, kneeling beside the dead man's collection. He reflexively felt for the data tablet he'd secreted away a few minutes ago. As if reading his thoughts, Ravenheart met his eyes and said, "Find anything?"

He stammered, "I'm just curious about why we haven't heard anything down here about this serial killer."

"We kept it off the grid until we were sure of what we were dealing with." The colonel relaxed her shoulders. The moss near the bed flamed brightly.

"We found our first victim stuffed into a dumpster in Boston. After the second we knew we had something serious on our hands. All were cut using the same weapon. Each had a tarot card placed in their left hand. Each card was different, part of a pattern, like the killer was playing games with us. He's sending a message through the tarot."

Ravenheart touched her bare hands to the man's throat. Her hands trembled slightly, as though straining from the effort of being in such close proximity to death.

"Jesus, colonel. That body is evidence. What are you doing?"

"Human emotion can leave a mark on astral space like a scar, detective. When a traumatic event like a murder takes place the energy it creates stays behind. I'm reading that energy."

"You look like you found something. You don't think bugs, do you?"

Ravenheart grinned. "I see you read my file."

Sam nodded. "Just the keywords."

She pointed her chin at his pocket. "You haven't taken your hand out of that pocket since I got here. What are you hiding in there?"

Sam's heart skipped a beat. He clenched at the tablet again. When he met her eyes she was smirking.

She said, "Stay away from poker. It isn't your game."

"I'm not playing games here, Colonel Ravenheart. This is my jurisdiction. My case. There aren't a lot of opportunities out here to make a career. This is my chance to make good on a promise to my family."

Anne Ravenheart stood up and brushed her hands off on a handkerchief. She said, "How long have you known you were a technomancer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do. You hacked my PAN and tried to trace my call to the home office. I'll bet you hacked that data tablet in your pocket as well."

His heart was beating faster now. There was no way she could know that. "I don't know what you think you're accusing me of, but if you think—"

Colonel Ravenheart said, "Seeks-the-Moon."

The GloMoss flared brightly for a moment. The hairs on the back of Sam's neck rose again, and he turned to see the same Amerindian spirit standing behind him. Colonel Ravenheart nodded to the spirit. When she spoke to Sam there was a cold edge to her voice. He imagined she sounded like this when she marched her troops to their death in the Cermak hive all those years ago. She said, "Seeks-the-Moon saw you take the tablet, and Poe, the sprite you encountered when you hacked me, told me everything else. She says you aren't trained, or you would have been able to take her down. So, I ask again, how long have you known?"

Sam was silent for several seconds. He stared at the spirit and then at Colonel Ravenheart. Lying did him no good here. He said, "I was in a coma for six months after the Crash. I started seeing things, stuff that couldn't be there, right after I regained consciousness. It was another year before I allowed myself to reach out and touch the Matrix."

"How often since then?"

"As seldom as possible."

She looked disappointed. "There are far stranger things in this world than technomancers, detective. Be grateful for your gift, as I am grateful for mine."

The colonel removed a fogged over plastic bag from her pocket and set it down beside the victim. Sam had to lean closer to see what was in the bag and when he did, he staggered backwards, fighting the urge to wretch. "Is that a human hand?"

She ignored him, sitting cross-legged in front of the body and the hand. Sam had seen forensic mages work before. The magic he knew was an invisible art framed by arcane handwriting, chanting, and precise movements. Colonel Anne Ravenheart did none of this. She breathed in deeply and exhaled a long slow breath. The GloMoss erupted into a green glow. A few moments later the glow faded.

She turned to the spirit and said somberly, "You see it, don't you?"

Seeks-the-Moon replied flatly, "Two people cannot have the same astral signature."

"How about six?"

Seeks-the-Moon said nothing.

"You say it isn't possible yet here we are. What other explanation do you have? Could it be Nahualli?"

"No, nothing like that. Nahualli is more like a color—a suit of cards even, emblazoned into your soul. You read as one of a kind, but not identical."

Sam watched the conversation in silence. He remembered what happened in Chicago when Knight Errant discovered bugs there. The city was placed under quarantine. They sent in Firewatch with a mountain of magic and firepower and failed to make a dent in the hive. So, Knight Errant acted out of desperation. They deployed the most powerful weapon they had at their disposal: a nuclear bomb. Eighteen years later, the rebuilding effort was barely underway. Colonel Ravenheart had been at the center of it all back then. Now she was here in his town, squatting beside the body of a dead man who'd clearly been afraid of magic. Colonel Ravenheart studied the body a final time before turning to Sam. She said, "Detective, I think its time you told me what was on that data tablet."

Bewildered, Sam explained everything he knew. The colonel absorbed it all patiently. Afterwards, she said, "The others were connected to Horizon as well. Do you think you can make sense of the notes?"

"With a little time, I might be able to come up with something."

Seeks-the-Moon said, "This is no doing of the spirit world. Man did this."

"How?"

A flicker of annoyance highlighted the spirit's face. He said, "When I am needed, find me. I would wish to know more of this."

And then he was gone. Colonel Ravenheart frowned, absently touching her hand to her chest.

Sam had had enough. "Colonel, I'd like to know what the hell you think is going on here? Is this still my crime scene, or not?"

She shook her head. "Tell your shift commander that OSI is taking command of this scene."

He swallowed hard. "Are you saying bugs did this?"

"No, not bugs. Nothing so simple as that." Then she thought for a minute and added, "And you're right, detective. There aren't too many opportunities to make your career in a place like this. So, how would you like to come work for me?"

STICKS

POSTED BY: BLACK MAMBA

VITAL STATS: STICKS

Age: 37 **Height:** 2.07 m
Weight: 113 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

If we're telling campfire stories we can't leave out good ol' Sticks. I want to apologize, because not everything I have to say is flattering, and I'm sure some of our posters will be adding much worse after I'm done. Sticks is not easy to understand. You can tug at the threads of his psyche all day and wind up empty-handed. The key is recognizing what happened to him in the '50s. Sticks was just a geeky kid pretending to be a shadowrunner when he was introduced to the Universal Brotherhood. He bought into the hype, drank the juice, and wound up being primed to merge with bug spirits.

There he was, laid out on the table, drugged up and set to become dinner for bugs, when Ares Firewatch busts in and hoses the place down. Sticks spent two years in a Chicago asylum while doctors tried to undo whatever brainwashing the Universal Brotherhood put him through. I didn't know Sticks before that, but I have to believe the experience changed him. There was a period of time, when the bugs are preparing to join with you, that you become something more primal than a human. UB victims deal with it in different ways. For Sticks, the way to get over it was to hunt down every bug he could find.

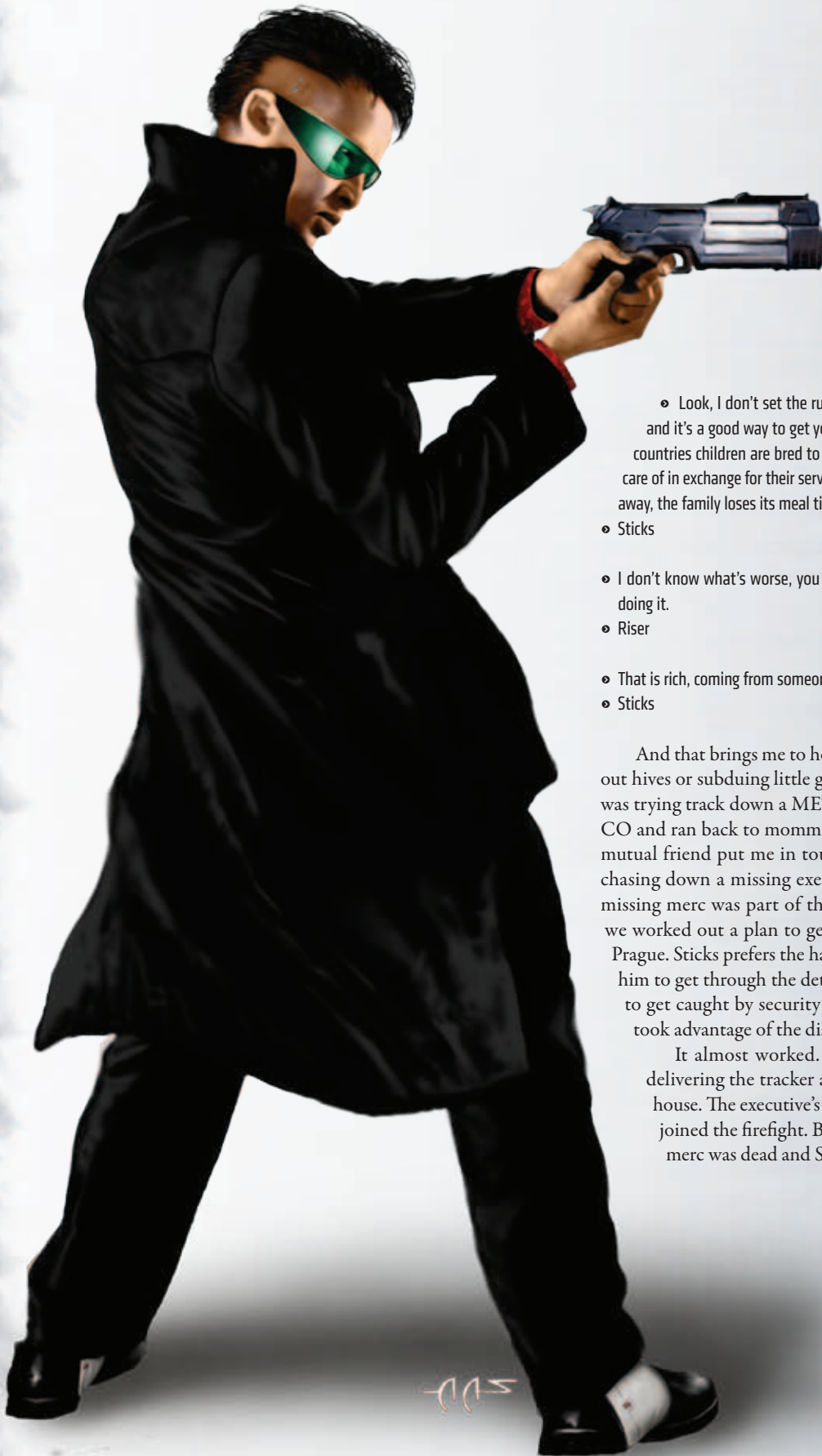
Sticks came by his street name after his time with the Universal Brotherhood. Up until then he ran under the name Remus. He changed it after spending two years in and out of dojos learning non-lethal combat techniques. In his early career, he spent most of his time collecting bounties, which means he was generally doing live grabs. These can get sticky—while common sense would tell you lay down your guns when someone gets the drop on you, it sometimes goes out the window when getting caught means going back to jail or worse. So you have someone fighting for their life, someone quite willing to take your life in exchange, and you have to return with the target still breathing. Broken bones and similar injuries to the target are to be expected, but a life-threatening injury means the client is taking a zero off your paycheck. So, Sticks learned how to take people out without making it permanent. His street name references the pair of Tonfa sticks that he likes to use on the job. With those he was able to reduce his number of "recovery accidents" and raise his rep to where it is today. Of course, that rep is variable, depending on what part of the world you're in and who you are talking to.

There are a lot of different types of bounty hunters out there. You've got your basic skip-tracing types, who hunt down bail jumpers; fugitive-recovery types, who go after international and corporate criminals; and then there are the ones who go after exotic hunts, like the hunters who track down bugs for profit. According to most people who know him, Sticks falls into that last category. He is a primarily a bug hunter, and one of the best I've seen. He is officially credited with locating seventeen hives and recovering over forty independent spirits worldwide. Though they could never admit it, all the major corporations keep a bounty board tracking the number of missing assets they still have and the bounty hunters who have recovered assets for them. Ares lists Sticks as their number three man in North America, so kudos to him for that.

- Who are numbers one and two?
- Baka Dabora
- Number one is a former seal team operating out of Tsimshian that specializes in material recovery. Number two is the UCAS Marshals. Ares has a reciprocal arrangement with the government to turn over any fugitives they locate operating within company jurisdiction. I know the deal isn't always honored, because I've seen Sticks' name on the U.S. Marshals' list, and Ares has yet to turn him over.
- Cosmo
- It sounds like the way most corporations do business. They'll give you what they don't want so long as you give them what they want in return. That is, unless you're a dragon. In that case they'll give you everything you ask for and ask nothing in return.
-

If Sticks' bounty work ended with bugs I'd put him up for shadowrunner of the year, but like I said, he's more primal than that. There is something about the thrill of the hunt that drives him to take on more and more jobs, even the ones he shouldn't and ones he can't handle. A bounty hunter captures fugitives for pay. These aren't necessarily people who've done something wrong, as you'll see, but entities who for one reason or another belong to someone else and have gone missing. Sticks does the jobs that others won't or can't do. If you talk to the right people in Addis Ababa, he is considered a celebrity. He built his international rep along with a small fortune tracking down runaway sex slaves and returning them to their owners.

- That's just wrong.
- Mihoshi Oni



• Look, I don't set the rules. I follow them. The market is lucrative, and it's a good way to get your name thrown around. Besides, in some countries children are bred to perform that role. Their families are taken care of in exchange for their servitude, so if the girl (or sometimes boy) gets away, the family loses its meal ticket.

• Sticks

• I don't know what's worse, you doing it or you working so hard to justify doing it.

• Riser

• That is rich, coming from someone who murders for rent.

• Sticks

And that brings me to how we met. When he isn't pointing out hives or subduing little girls, Sticks takes on private work. I was trying track down a MET2000 scumbag who'd popped his CO and ran back to momma. I was running into dead ends. A mutual friend put me in touch with Sticks, who was in town chasing down a missing executive. Our paths converged. The missing merc was part of the security detail for the exec, and we worked out a plan to get close to them at an art house in Prague. Sticks prefers the hand-to-hand stuff, so it was easy for him to get through the detectors. Part of the plan was for me to get caught by security loaded down with ware, while he took advantage of the distraction to tag the two principles.

It almost worked. The merc made Sticks as he was delivering the tracker and tried to shoot it out in the art house. The executive's security team turned on Sticks and joined the firefight. Before we could get out of there, my merc was dead and Sticks' exec was gone. I still counted



it as a win. The merc got what he had coming, and there was enough nuyen in my account to buy my new friend a beer. He was pissed about the guy who got away, but I tried to tell him that the world doesn't judge you on the ones you didn't get, because the world never knows. You're judged on the people you capture, and Sticks has a lot of notches on his belt.

- I wish I agreed with you, Black Mamba, but I'm only as good as the last one to get away. More bounties have slipped through my fingers than I've caught. I stay up nights thinking about ways to make that right.
- Sticks

- So tell us the one that keeps you up the most.
- Jimmy No

• Has to be Adegoke Yoba, an arms dealer working out of Mombasa, Kenya. I was contracted by the South African government to bring him in for a hearing. He spotted me coming out of a local pawnshop where the fence had given me a tip. Black or not, North Americans don't blend in on that continent. He made a break for his car, and I caught up to him right as he gunned the engine. I followed on foot until I could get to my rental and then chased him all the way to the Likoni bridge, where a patrol car cut me off. The cops in Africa don't bother much with questions and asking people to freeze. They put me down with a taser as soon as I stepped out the car. I spent three days in a Kenyan prison trying to fast-talk my way out of extradition. If not for a local contact, I'd be posting this from Fulsom. My guy told me Yoba was connected with the PD and United Oil. I can't help but thinking that nailing that guy would have led me to several other big-money bounties.

- Sticks
- Yoba was in Seattle for an arms trade about two weeks ago if you're interested.
- Riser
- No shit? Lets talk off-net. I'm sure we can work something out.
- Sticks

We bagged our first real bounty together in '64 in an animal-control job for Renraku. The corporation lost one of its pet embracers while transporting it to the arcology near Luzon in the Philippines. They weren't willing to disrupt their precarious relationship with Maasaru and the Huks by sending in a retrieval team, but at the same time they couldn't let it wander around with a Renraku RFID tag jammed in its back. So Renraku contracted six different bounty hunters to go in and bring the animal out. Sticks called me in because I know the terrain and the people, which gave him an advantage over the competition.

I love Sticks, but he isn't cut out for jungle warfare. We hired a Huk scout to track the beast through the woods near Mt. Pinatubo. We thought it was just running away in random directions, but after a day running ourselves ragged we realized it was heading toward the Pyramid of Asia, then doubling back to throw us off its trail. That site is crawling with Huk officials, so we made our way to a point twenty miles south of the magical site and laid a trap for the creature. Now, while Sticks may not be cut out for trekking over rough terrain, I would trust him with my life in a brawl. That's what it came down to. We put six stun rounds in the thing, and it just kept coming at us, beating its chest. In the end, the rounds worked well enough that Sticks was able to subdue it with those Tonfas of his.

We've worked together several more times over the years, each time in a hellhole worst than the last. I can't deny that he's a dirty son of a bitch, but he's good at what he does. Sticks is a pleasant reminder that you can live in the shadows without selling yourself to corporate masters. There are enough people with a retrieval tag on their back that you can pick and choose who to work for.

- What is the difference between bounty hunting and run-of-the-mill extractions?
- Baka Dabora

• There is a specific corporate dispensation for dealing with corporate fugitives. Someone who is extracted immediately becomes a missing person or, in cases of clear complicity in the extraction, a fugitive. Corporations can then file a warrant with the Corporate Court and offer a bounty for the safe return of the individual. The really tricky part is whether or not you are a contracted retrieval agent. If the corp officially contracts you to locate and retrieve a missing person, which some do, then there is a mountain of paperwork that can affect your bottom line. If you're running a black op, then street rules apply.

- Kia
- In my situation, I usually have to declare my intent to hunt bugs, because Ares has jurisdictional authority over most of the places where I've found hives. They write out a service contract and I go off to do my thing. Without that contract, any kills you make on Ares soil are not subject to payment and, in fact, you could be fined for harming bugs on Ares soil. You learn how to read the fine print really quick, because a corp isn't going to be obvious about their plans to screw you over.
- Sticks
- In sum, if you are extracting someone who has been tagged as a fugitive, you're a bounty hunter. If you're snatching a guy from the place they work from, you're a shadowrunner.
- Rigger X

STICKS

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
6	4 (6)	5	5 (7)	3	4	4	3	5	3.2		

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/10

Armor (B/I): 14/8

Skills: Armorer 3, Athletics skill group 5, Automatics (Machine Pistols) 6 (+2), Clubs 6, Computer 3, First Aid 4, Infiltration 3, Intimidation (Physical) 5 (+2), Longarms (Sniper Rifles) 5 (+2), Navigation 3, Perception 6, Pilot Aircraft 3, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pilot Watercraft 4, Shadowing 5, Survival 5, Throwing Weapons (Grenades) 4 (+2), Tracking (Desert) 5 (+2)

Knowledge skills: Bug Spirits 4, Criminal Hideouts 4, Law Enforcement Organizations 4, Law Enforcement Techniques 5, Wanted Criminals 6, English N, French 3, Japanese 2, Spanish 4, Swahili 4, Yoruba 2

Qualities: Guts, Toughness

Augmentations: Cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ low-light, orientation system 2 (alphaware), radar sensor (alphaware), thermographic, optical magnification), muscle replacement 2

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 6), armor jacket, autopicker (Rating 6), commlink (custom (Response 4, Signal 5, Firewall 5, System 4), directional jamer (Rating 8), FFBA (full suit), 200 gel rounds (100 Machine Pistol, 100 Sniper Rifle), professional camera w/ infrared lens, super-telephoto lens), 200 stick-n-shock rounds (100 Machine Pistol, 100 Sniper Rifle), tag eraser,

Programs: Analyze 4, Stealth 4, Tracking 4

Weapons:

Barret Model 121 [Sniper Rifle, DV 9P or 9S or 6S(e), AP -4 or -2, SA, RC (2), 14(c), w/ 100 rounds gel ammo, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]

Tonfa [Reach 1, DV 5P, AP —]

Steyr TMP [Machine Pistol, DV 4P or 4S or 6S(e), AP — or +2, SA/BF/FA, RC 2, 30 (c), w/ gas-vent 2, 100 rounds gel ammo, smartgun system, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]

THORN

POST BY FASTJACK

VITAL STATS: THORN

Age: 59 **Height:** 1.81 m
Weight: 93 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Green **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Elf **Awakened:** Yes (Adept)

- I initially asked Fianchetto to assemble this for my own purposes, but I find it fits well into this collection of posts. So it's here, along with some remarks from various parties involved when it was first assembled.
- Fastjack
- Fastjack, this is incomplete, but for the timetable you presented me with and for the man it concerns, it will have to do. Much of this information came from his existing Argus records (thanks to Netcat and Slamm-O! for their assistance there) but what else I was able to gather, I did through my own channels.
I can appreciate the concerns that existing members have brought up, but I, personally, feel Thorn would be a worthwhile addition to JackPoint as a regular poster. His conversational thesis on modern espionage work went over well, and he has both provided reasonable insight on other JackPoint posts since then and assisted several of us with direct action in the physical world. Security concerns are all well and good, but not for the reasons Picador is putting forward.
- Fianchetto
- I, obviously, disagree. When we've already got security issues to deal with, the last thing we need to add to the mix is a professional murderer and liar who spent half his life working for the scum of the Earth.
- Picador
- Well, that just warms the cockles of me heart, it does. A ringing endorsement like that, and before I've even gotten started reading? I can only assume Jackie left this lying about for me to find on purpose, so I look forward to giving it a once-over and correcting any mistakes I spot. Maybe.
- Thorn

Real Name: Caolain, Rory Michael

Birthdate: August 16, 2014

Known Aliases: Mikhael Bystrolyotov, Michael Baird, Robert Bishop, Michael Carter, Nick Carver, Samuel Cooper, Rhodry Cwnic [The list continues for several hundred more entries. Realistically, it's best to just assume he's got more SINS than the devil. -F]

Awakened/Emerged: Adept

Languages: English, Irish Gaelic, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Sperethiel, Italian, Japanese, Arabic, Yoruba, Swahili, Afrikaans, Hausa [And, again, many more with varying levels of fluency and literacy. He's almost certainly used his adept abilities to increase his linguistic versatility. -F]

Known Affiliations: Argus, MET 2000, Rinelle ke'Tesrae, Irish National Liberation Army, Sons of the Alamo, United Nations Armed Forces [This is another incomplete list. Those listed are groups he is known to have worked alongside more than once, and among whom he's likely to still have assets regardless of his relationship with those in the top tiers. -F]

Current Whereabouts: North America

The espionage operative code-named "Thorn" by his parent agency is a difficult man to pin down. He began his career as a self-described freedom fighter battling against the oppression of the Tír na nÓg ruling elite, spent the better part of two years as an independent operative shortly thereafter, and was recruited by MET 2000 into their budding Argus agency several decades ago. His time with Argus makes for a fascinating maze of redacted, classified, and ultra-classified documents, presenting a history of crisscrossing the globe as an undercover operative, a legitimate military contractor (particularly in advisory roles), and as a deniable operative for which files are missing or corrupted. It is said that at dawn and dusk man casts a long shadow, and in the case of Thorn's life the saying is somewhat prophetic; we know the most about the beginning of his career and his most recent activities, with much of the bloodshed and deceit in between left only to guesswork and approximation.

- If you think it's hard to muddle through it and make sense of it all after the fact, try being there in the first place. You shadowrunners don't have the market cornered on contracts where you're never quite sure what you're doing, why, or who you're really doing it for.
- Thorn

Rory Michael Caolain's was born at Denby Green hospital in Belfast, County Down. Extensive travel records exist prior to the Christmas Address of 2034, when the comparatively open borders of Ireland allowed the Caolain family to visit with relatives in Edinburgh and London. The formation of Tír na nÓg disrupted those opportunities, as travel records show no further entries/departures since then.

Rory eventually enrolled at the Queen's University, Belfast, in 2035. He became involved in anti-Tír protests there, and was flagged by the Tír Republican Corps as a social dissident following a rally during his third term on campus. Things escalated quickly from that point—as they inevitably do, with moderately involved protestors either backing away from the movement after their first brush with law enforcement or plunging in headfirst—and it was only a few months later that he withdrew from the university and traveled to a paramilitary training facility.

- Mid-30s, hmm? That probably made it either a Balkans camp or somewhere in the Middle East, though the skills learned at either would be fairly similar. There's good money in those training camps, if you've got the moral versatility and the instructional ability for it.
- Aufheben

Caolain's return to Tír na nÓg coincided with a startling spike in activity by the Irish National Liberation Army. His adept abilities were recognized during training, and he quickly became a trump card for the INLA. The TRC maintains an extensive file on him to this day and remembers him with terrible unkindness. Even as recently as two years ago his relationship with Argus and their refusal to hand him over played a role in that agency's aborted contract negotiations within the Tír. Given the rarity of adepts at the time and the overwhelming magical superiority the TRC otherwise had, maximizing his activity made simple strategic sense on the INLA's part.

- Ah, the wild, misspent days of my intemperate youth. In my defense, I wasn't quite thinking clearly upon the time of my recruitment. There was a lass involved, you see.
- Thorn
- Isn't there always?
- Slamm-O!

Media reports went wild late in 2039 over a mass execution of several key INLA leaders and visiting Knights of the Red Branch personnel. Neither the Ulster Revolutionary Force, New Ulster Revolutionary Movement, nor any of the other various para groups of the day ever claimed responsibility for the attack, and to this day the TRC files don't have any evidence that more than one shooter was involved. INLA leadership took years to stabilize after the attack, and mistrust over the incident set back INLA-Red Branch relations by decades.

- If the Day of the Wren Massacre was Rory, it's a miracle he didn't blow up sooner. Like most anti-Tír groups over the years, the INLA and Red Branch both became increasingly anti-metahuman, transforming over time into social hate groups. Caolain's initial inclusion in the INLA shows how badly they needed him.
- Kay St. Irregular
- Assholes, the lot of 'em. Bunch of American bastards swaggering around the old country and insisting they're the real Irish because they have round ears, just like the Tír pricks insisting the opposite. Knights of the Red Branch? Order of Cu Chulainn? Fuck 'em both. Who are they and their Paths and secret handshakes and shite to say who's really a warrior and who isn't?
- Thorn

After that, he turns into a ghost in Interpol records, with even his formal Argus dossier full of question marks and estimations. He's believed to have simply offered himself to the terrorist market as a gun for hire, likely through assets he'd gathered during his initial training. Rumors abound as to where precisely he served over this period of nearly two years. What we do know is that he was picked up by MET 2000 in October of 2040 after having fought as a mercenary in the Iran/Iraq War earlier that year (though reports are conflicted as to which side he served with).

- A trained adept was still a rarity back in those days, though their abilities gave someone all the edge they'd need to be a successful merc. Add in the experience Thorn had collected by then, and it's no wonder he was busy.
- Red Anya



Thorn was involved in standard military field operations for MET 2000 for several years, leading up to the formal creation of Argus. Eschewing the armored tradition of the parent unit, Caolain's records show that he received extensive infantry training, first as a standard trooper, then airborne and air assault certifications, sniper and counter-sniper courses, and special-operations training. What non-redacted records of his are still available show a mix of disciplinary actions and commendations in the course of his career.

Argus was officially formed as a separate corporate entity in 2045, and "Agent Thorn" is listed on their initial roster of active field agents. He served as the tip of the spear for Argus in much the same way he had for the INLA years earlier. No intelligence agency has complete transparency, but the nature of Argus makes many of their most successful operations common corporate knowledge, and it is no coincidence that many of those operations feature Agent Thorn. His initial successes granted him enormous respect as an individual within the organization, and some measure of operational freedom came alongside. Interestingly, Agent Thorn is only seldom noted as serving as an operational handler instead of a field agent.

Caolain's time with Argus spans a period of roughly 28 years, the precise details of which are missing, conflicting, or doctored. Anecdotal evidence—some of it personal—speaks of a penchant for assassinations and other comparatively overt operations that were well suited to Argus' nature as the extension of a military, not corporate, entity. Agent Thorn was known more for bloodshed than intrigue, but was quite adept at both. I personally crossed paths with him many times during our careers, and both of us have the scars to show for it.

Given his early experiences, Thorn was often assigned to Argus contracts where their employer was, for lack of a better term, the underdog. Rory showed a genuine talent for organizing and advising insurgency groups, rebel paramilitaries, local militias, and their ilk, whether it was defending newly discovered diamond mines in Africa, attacking corporate interests in Europe, or working as a third-party conduit to funnel covert UCAS and Sioux assistance to terrorist cells in Tír Tairngire. Anyone who could pay Argus' fees and keep from directly harming German nation-states was free to hire them, and Thorn shone in these semi-legal-at-best jobs that might otherwise have gone to shadowrunners.

Thorn's underworld and independent contacts never withered after he signed on as a company man; he was encouraged to keep them alive and well, using them as assets. More than once he changed the odds of an operation by using the local criminal element as wild cards. Sometimes this involved employing local gangs as muscle or co-opting street racers as getaway drivers. He was often involved in outright criminal activities in his efforts to keep his contacts cultivated and maintain appropriate cover identities. He often armed and equipped these assets to keep them loyal, and between this tendency and his experience handling insurgent groups he picked up a knack for small-scale gunrunning operations.

- The Russo-Japanese underworld still isn't sure if he was doing undercover work or just sidelining for profit, but rumor is he got snagged and shipped off to Siberia somewhere, about ten years back, during one of those gunrunning jobs.
- Red Anya

- I'm familiar with the rumors as well, and it coincides with a period where documentation on Thorn is rather thin. If so, I believe it to be one of only three times in his career he's seen the inside of a cell that was not part of an elaborate undercover operation.
- Fianchetto

When he wasn't actively in the field, Thorn most often served as a recruitment and training officer. He preferred to teach and organize in hostile zones when recruits would understand how much the lessons mattered, but he often volunteered at Argus' training facility just outside Hannover. He remains one of their most effective recruiters when acting in deep cover identities in neutral territory. He routinely surpassed quotas for such assignments, and it is fair to assume he retains a healthy network of assets.

Most recently, we've confirmed Thorn's account of events in Nairobi. It's certain that his information of the UN/Corporate Court/MET 2000 assault came firsthand, and that he played a key role in preparing and carrying out said assault. There is also no denying that it was his last assignment with Argus. Once the Kibera assault was over, he never returned to their headquarters or communicated with his handler, and he is mentioned in MET 2000 records since then only as a target, not an operative.

Rumors place him at a half-dozen locations across the North American continent since then, traveling under a several different identities, often with an itinerary that coincides with a series of murders. Speculation abounds as to who he's working for now, if anyone, but several of these recent assassinations are people with whom he had worked in the past. People who have crossed Thorn's path in a professional manner seem to be dying for their trouble lately, and no one's certain who is sending him after them.

Psychological profiling of Thorn shows that he performs at his best under the loose direction of others—too tight a leash and he'll pull free, but no guidance at all and he seems to drift—and it remains to be seen who is steering him at present. Left to his own devices he goes looking for direction from others by means of contracts or other employment, so it is unlikely he's acting entirely alone.

- I heard from a few colleagues that the old man's cleaning house and isn't afraid to hit the shadows for backup. Skeletons in his closet are getting dragged into the light and shot to pieces. You know how we've all dealt with a Johnson we'd rather kill, but we sucked it up for the credstick? Thorn might be living the dream right now.
- Riser
- Thorn's old jobs in North America were pretty limited. If he's roaming the continent on some vengeance mission, far from his European and African buddies, he'll need someone with major pull helping him out.
- Sticks

Whether or not Thorn is accepted at JackPoint, I urge my fellow posters not to underestimate him. He is a practiced field agent who has been actively working in the military intelligence community for as long as many of you have been alive, and for whom old age is very much a laughing matter. He has been in his prime for three decades thanks to his metatype, his adept abilities have been actively increasing since his earliest days of

violence and stealth—days spent, need I remind you, successfully avoiding or actively ambushing the *Reach Fuileach*—and he is an altogether versatile and dangerous man.

We might momentarily ignore the usual skill-set possessed by espionage agents or successful terrorists the world over, such as combat driving, improvised demolition, situational awareness, infiltration skills, a quick mind, and excellent athleticism. Even without all that, I need to make special mention of his abilities at close quarters.

While as superb a shot with a long gun as one might expect given his field experience, his ability with a sidearm is particularly noteworthy. The concealability of handguns has made them his weapon of choice for some years now, and his ability with them is nothing short of artistic. Thorn has a penchant for flechette ammunition, but heavily armored opponents should not be lulled into a sense of false security due to that; his accuracy is world-class. He isn't known for having any single favorite weapon, but rather sees handguns as the disposable tools they are. Count on him having access to at least one at any given time, of whatever is the most readily available on the local black market or was made available by deceased opponents.

He also exhibits an almost preternatural ability to avoid being hit. He is less hardy than your average street samurai or augmented mercenary, but that seldom matters as he has shown a knack for avoiding incoming fire. He seems to instinctively flow away from crosshairs, smartlinks, and laser sights, feeling danger coming and sidestepping it with uncanny anticipation. Given even a moment to prepare, the same can be said of offensive magical attacks.

Perhaps the best way to convey the threat he offers is to say this: I am certain of only three instances in a decades-spanning career wherein he was sent to kill someone and failed. One of those was a High Prince of Tír Tairngire. Underestimate him at your peril.

- I may not want him on JackPoint, but that doesn't mean I'm planning an S&D against him any time soon.
- Picador
- Good. You've got no reason to believe he was involved with Matador's death in any way. Guilt by association shouldn't be reason enough for you to get in his face every time he posts, much less to go after him. You already buried that corpse. Just agree to be civil and let it go.
- Pistons
- "There can be no pacts between men and lions, wolves and lambs can never agree."
- Picador
- "But hate each other out and out, through and through." Fine.
- Thorn
- For all Mr. Caolain's overt hatred for Tír na nÓg and their way of living, there is a curious pattern to his life. He walks their Wheel and doesn't admit it. He was a Warrior when he was angry and young, but Argus smoothed those rough edges and trained him as a Steward and spy. He lived and worked as a Bard and Druid during his time teaching young fighters and recruiting assets on campuses around the world. Now he is something else. Something more. None of them and all of them. An elder spirit, fulfilling his destiny at last.
- Arete
- Huh.
- Thorn

THORN

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
5	7	6 (9)	5	7	5	6	5	14	7	5	11 (14)	1 (4)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11

Armor (B/I): 4/3

Active Skills: Armorer (Firearms) 3 (+2), Artisan (Acting) 4 (+2), Athletics skill group 6, Automatics 5, Blades 3, Clubs 3, Cracking skill group 2, Diving 4, Electronics skill group 4, Escape Artist 4, Demolitions (Improvised) 5 (+2), First Aid (Combat Wounds) 3 (+2), Forgery 3, Gunnery 3, Heavy Weapons 3, Influence skill group 6, Instruction 5, Intimidation 4, Locksmith 5, Longarms 5, Mechanic skill group 2, Outdoors Skill group 4, Perception (Visual) 6 (+2), Pilot Aircraft 3, Pilot Ground Craft (Wheeled) 5 (+2), Pilot Watercraft 4, Pistols (Semi-Automatics) 7 (+2), Stealth skill group 6, Unarmed Combat (Martial Arts) 6 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: African Politics 5, Border Patrol Tactics 3, Business (Megacorporate) 2 (+2), Chemistry 2, European Politics 4, Fine Cuisine (Alcoholic Beverages) 4 (+2), History (European) 5 (+2), Literature 4, Magic Background 6, Mercenary Units 4, Philosophy (Ancient) 4 (+2), Security Protocols (Military) 5 (+2), Security Design, Smuggler Routes 3, Tír na nÓg Politics 5, Tír Tairngire Politics 5, Tradecraft 6, UCAS Politics 3, Afrikaans 3, Arabic 3, English 6, French 5, German 4, Hausa 3, Irish Gaelic N, Italian 5, Japanese 4, Russian 3, Scottish Gaelic 6, Spanish 5, Sperehtiel 6, Swahili 3, Welsh 5, Yoruba 3

Qualities: Adept, Ambidextrous, Aptitude (Pistols), Catlike, College Education, Enemy (assorted), Guts, Lucky, Martial Arts (+1 DV Unarmed, Ready Weapon as Free Action, Take Aim as Free Action), Poor Self Control: Vindictive, Records on File, Sensitive System, SINner

Initiate Grade: 8

Metamagics: Adept centering, cognition, flexible signature, infusion, masking, somatic control

Adept Powers: Attribute Boost: Agility 1, Cloak 1, Combat Sense 2, Counterstrike 1, Critical Strike 2, Facial Sculpt 1, Improved Ability: Infiltration 1, Improved Ability: Pistols 2, Improved Reflexes 3, Improved Senses (Select Sound Filter, Sound Dampening), Keratin Control, Killing Hands, Kinesics 3, Linguistics, Master of 1000 Faces, Melanin Control, Nimble Fingers, Spell Resistance 2, Voice Control

Gear: Aces High armored jacket, armor clothing, 4 x autopicker, imaging glasses [Rating 4, w/ image link, smartlink, vision enhancement 3, vision magnification], 6 x stimulant patches, Transys Avalon Commlink running Iris Orb (Response 4, Signal 4, Firewall 3, System 3), Triumph Bonneville racing bike (stats as Indian Pathfinder)

Weapons:

Ares Viper [Heavy Pistol, DV 8P(f), AP +5, SA/BF, 30(c)]

Thermal Smoke Grenade [grenade, 10m smoke radius, 4 combat turns]

For campaigns making use of *The Way of the Adept* optional rules, Thorn should be modified so that his Qualities include The Warrior's Way (p. 14, *The Way of the Adept*). Modifying his adept power costs accordingly, change the ratings of the following powers to: Combat Sense 7, Critical Strike 3, Spell Resistance 3, and add the new powers Swift and Terrible 2 and Improved Ability: Unarmed Combat 2.

TOMMY TALON

POSTED BY: WINTERHAWK

VITAL STATS: TOMMY TALON

Age: 43 or so **Height:** 1.76 m
Weight: 78 kg **Hair:** Brown
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** Yes
 (Hermetic Mage)

- The interesting thing about a guy like Tommy Talon is how many people know him, or about him. Because of that, I thought it would be good to essentially crowd-source this entry—Winterhawk assembled the basics, leaving plenty of room for the rest of you (and a guest or two) to chime in with the good stuff. Get to it!
- Fastjack

A skilled spellslinger and a runner who went to the top ranks of our profession, Tommy Talon learned firsthand that magic really comes from the heart and soul, and that you have to be very careful what you wish for, because the results can come back to haunt you later on. In Talon's case, they certainly did.

Let's start with the basics: Talon is a street mage known to have worked primarily in the Seattle, Los Angeles, and Boston Metroplexes. He's a known associate of Assets, Inc., Toshi Akimura ("Silk"), and Smedley Pemberton III ("Boom"), both former Watchers for Dunkelzahn.

- Talon ran with Pemberton in Boston and Seattle and worked the Seattle shadows with Akimura in the 2050s, meaning he probably knew them both before or around the time they were recruited as Watchers for Dunkelzahn. Nobody I've ever talked to knows if Talon worked directly for the great wrym, but he was certainly associated with a lot of people who did.
- Sunshine
- Talon didn't work directly for Dunkelzahn as far as I know. Of course, the old wrym played things close, so it's certainly possible Talon was a "sleeper" or otherwise tangled up in Dunkelzahn's schemes without even knowing it himself.
- Frosty

EARLY LIFE

Talon was born in the Boston Metroplex sometime around 2030. He was SINless, which was the case for a lot of kids in the heart of the Northeast Metropolitan Axis born following the first Crash and the formation of the UCAS (with all the bureaucratic shuffle that entailed). He spent his early childhood into his early teens in a Catholic orphanage in South Boston.

As a teen, Talon left the orphanage, possibly due to the Awakening of his magical potential, which was poorly understood at the time. He later attended MIT&T on a corporate scholarship from Mitsuhamma Computer Technologies.

- From street orphan to student in one of the best thaumaturgy programs at one of the top schools in the world? What happened there?
- Cosmo
- That actually wasn't so unusual. Remember, we're talking about a nascent mage only a generation or so after the Awakening. Corporate recruitment of the Awakened got aggressive pretty fast, and poor, disadvantaged, or SINless kids were among the most promising recruits, since most of them were willing to sign over their whole lives to the company in exchange for a way out of their circumstances. The corp then arranged to keep them in school as long as it looked like it would pay off in the form of a loyal wage-mage in the end. Kind of like the corruption of college athletics, but with a magical twist.
- Ethernaut
- There is still a definite gap. By all accounts, Talon hit the streets in his mid-teens, but didn't attend MIT&T until his late teens. There are two to four years unaccounted for in there at least.
- Mr. Bonds
- There's an interesting correlation, if you cross-reference some of the Boston 'plex news archives at the time. Not long before Talon began attending MIT&T, a South Boston gang called the Asphalt Rats was wiped out. They were ambushed in an alley and killed in the blast of a magical fireball. Boston PD Magical Forensics confirms it, but the investigation dead-ended and was written off as a wizgang incident or some street deal gone bad. The interesting bit is that, just days before, the Asphalt Rats were involved in another incident report about members of the gang gunning down some guy in the area. The victim's name was Jason Vale, and the cops tried to locate an eyewitness to the crime—Vale's younger boyfriend, a guy the locals said was named "Tommy."
- DangerSensei
- So gangers killed Talon's then-boyfriend and he fireballed them into briquettes? That would mean he already knew a pretty fair amount of magic even before starting his B.A. program, which means he was already learning magic on the streets.
- Haze
- What little I could dig up on Jason Vale says he was a street mage known for using his Talent to help out the locals, kind of an urban cunning-man. He could have taught Talon a thing or two while they were together.
- Hannibelle
- I know a bit about the incident with the 'Rats. The place where they died was known as "Fire Alley" for years. There was some *bad* juju lingering around there, let me tell you. Not just the kind you'd expect from a bunch of people burning to death (which is bad enough). Whatever happened there, it involved some really twisted magic. Someone must have cleaned it up,

eventually, though. I heard from an associate in Boston that Fire Alley has been astrally clean for a few years now.

- Ethernaut

By all accounts, Talon kept some of his street connections while he was a student at MIT&T. Eventually, during his sophomore year, he began working the Boston shadows on the side. At the end of the academic year, Talon was caught cheating on an exam and expelled. Before MCT could invoke the penalty clause of his contract, they were paid the full amount of the money invested in Talon's education, prorated to that point, and the contract was closed.

- Who paid the piper?
- DangerSensei

- Could have been Talon himself, using money he earned shadowrunning. That's a pretty hefty amount of cred, though, so maybe he had some outside help.

- Mr. Bonds

- Talon wasn't "caught" cheating. I heard he cheated deliberately and set himself up to get caught so he could violate his contract and invoke the penalty clause. Apparently, while on a run in Boston, he found out that Mitsuhamma was responsible for setting up the death of his boyfriend by paying off the Asphalt Rats. Talon initially refused their recruitment offer, but accepted later when there was nothing tying him to the Boston streets. He paid off MCT with cred from their own coffers, laundered and handed back to them with a smile, then he disappeared into the shadows. He always wanted to find the MCT middleman responsible, but I don't know if he ever did.

- Frosty

- He did.
- FastJack

CAREER

Following his departure from MIT&T, Talon continued working the Boston shadows for a while before making his way to Los Angeles, where he worked for about a year before moving to Seattle with the troll rocker Boom (Smedley Pemberton). In Seattle, the two worked with Toshi Akimura (who used the street name "Silk"). Both Pemberton and Akimura later became Watchers working on retainer for the Great Dragon Dunkelzahn, although their connection to the dragon wasn't known until after Dunkelzahn's death.

- With details endlessly discussed elsewhere.
- Frosty

- So did Talon get left anything in the Old Wyrn's will?
- Slamm-O!

- Not unless it was delivered to him in a roundabout way, which is certainly possible. Maybe that's where he got his trademark power focus? Talon is not mentioned by name in the will itself, but we know that was just the tip of the iceberg where Dunkelzahn's plans were concerned. In an October 2057 post

to Shadowland, Talon related the story of helping out Dr. Miles Swinburne, who received an old Tarot deck in Dunkelzahn's will, and he doesn't mention any connection with the dragon or the will (not that he necessarily would).

- Pistons

- A few years after Dunkelzahn's death, and after leaving Assets, Inc., Talon began wearing a power focus called "Dragonfang" which looked like a curved "tooth" carved from crystal, set in a silver necklace with Celtic designs. Could have been an inheritance from Dunkelzahn.

- Axis Mundi



- Close, but not quite.
- Man-of-Many-Names
- I know I always ask this, but do you actually know anything, or are you just stirring the shit?
- Snopes
- The answer will come, though not from me.
- Man-of-Many-Names

Talon took a step up in the shadowrunning game when he started working with Assets, Inc., an elite team of runners led by the adept Quicksilver (who had Dunkelzahn connections of his own). Talon worked with the team on an *ad hoc* basis, but eventually left Assets and returned to his native Boston.

- Talon replaced Assets' prior team mage, Miranda, who was killed in action.
- Kay St. Irregular
- If pics from around that time are any indication, Assets definitely improved Talon's sense of style: shortly after he started working with the team he cut his hair short, ditched a lot of his grungy "street mage" look, and adopted more cutting-edge (at the time) fashions. It definitely worked much better for him, if you ask me.
- Aracos
- He also acquired a magical dagger somewhere along the line. Talon was involved in rescuing Mary Beth Tyre, who also was mentioned in Dunkelzahn's will (See the pattern yet? It's visible from space!), from an ant-spirit nest. Ms. Tyre's own recollections of her rescue talk about Talon wielding a "glowing golden dagger" with magical sigils and a gemstone set in the pommel.
- Axis Mundi
- It was called Talonclaw. He made it.
- Aracos
- Talon quit Assets, Inc., right after the Mary Beth Tyre run and relocated to Boston, but not before his place in DeeCee was blown up. Rumor had it that Talon's split from Assets was less than pleasant, and things might have gotten physical.
- Kay St. Irregular
- Not so. Quicksilver and Talon argued at the end of the Tyre run, true, but the incident at his place had nothing to do with Assets, nor did Talon's decision to move back to Boston. Both were related to personal matters back there.
- Jane-in-the-Box
- As I said before, you have to be careful what you wish for where magic is concerned. Jane is right: Talon had personal business to take care of in Boston at the time, and it was part of what kept him there.
- Aracos

In the Boston Metroplex, Talon established a new team in partnership with his old associate Boom, now owner and operator of the Avalon nightclub and a high-placed fixer. They put together a team that quickly became known as one of the best in the 'plex, with plenty of work in the wake of events like the establishment of the Dunkelzahn Institute for Magical

Research. Up-and-coming corps like Manadyne, aggressive and looking for an edge, also became useful clients. Talon's team included Harlan "Hammer" Hammarand out of NYC, Trouble (a NEMA-area hacker), and Valkyrie, a driver and pilot originally from Europe.

- A later, but lesser-known, member of Talon's shadowrunning team around this time was often hidden in plain sight. Talon was sometimes accompanied by a hawk with golden-brown feathers, or a wolf with silvery fur and glowing eyes, almost certainly an ally spirit of some sort. In fact, I heard about a mid-ranking member of the Illuminates of the New Dawn who "lost" a certain item to Talon in Boston. He claimed that he saw the motorcycle Talon was riding transform into the hawk and assist Talon in overcoming his magical defenses! The item in question later turned up in the hands of the Dunkelzahn Institute in Cambridge.
- Ethernaut
- *A motorcycle ally spirit?* That's the most fucking absurd thing I've ever heard.
- Snopes
- Oh, I don't know. I've seen stranger.
- Aracos
- It is not completely without sense. Some traditional lore tells of magicians carried around by a spirit ally in one form or another, including flying horses, reindeer, or goats, to say nothing of walking huts or flying carpets. A spirit able to at least appear like a motorcycle, and essentially function like one in that form, is theoretically possible. In magic, sometimes absurd ideas have the most effect.
- Axis Mundi

Talon and his team ascended to and stayed in rarified circles for quite some time. This included dealings with the Dunkelzahn Institute, Saeder-Krupp, Cross Applied Technologies, and some of the factions at work in Boston's shadows, including the Irish ex-pat Knights of the Red Branch.

- This is an almost criminally brief summary of the years we worked together, but I wouldn't expect there to be a great deal of information out there. I can tell you that a lot of those "dealings" turned out to be much, much more than they appeared, as my associates in the biz can attest from their own experience.
- Boom
- Would you care to be more forthcoming with some details?
- Snopes
- I thought you'd never ask. One example I can cite is how Talon came to acquire his power focus, Dragonfang. It was a gift from Lofwyr, a token of remembrance following a particularly harrowing experience in Europe. We were hired to find a missing archeologist and the artifact he had taken, not knowing said artifact was intended as a trap for Lofwyr. When it was set off at our meeting, I was sure that we were responsible for the great wrym's death, and that we would spend the rest of our no doubt very brief lives on the run from Saeder-Krupp, whomever set the trap, or both. As it turned out, Lofwyr walked into the trap deliberately as part of a gambit to find out who was behind it. Dragonfang was apparently his way of saying thanks ... or of baiting the next trap, maybe. If that was the case, I never heard about it, though.
- Boom

- When was this?
- Snopes
- Oh, about ten years ago or so, during the European leg of Ragnarock's world tour. You can look it up.
- Boom
- What about the Knights of the Red Branch? They lost their leader and largely broke up around 2061, didn't they? Talon had something to do with that?
- Thorn
- Indirectly. We ended up preventing the KRB from releasing a dangerous weaponized pathogen in the 'plex. Seems only fitting, as we were kind of responsible for them having it in the first place. But then what runner hasn't been in *that* situation, right?
- Boom
- Lots have been there, but not all of them bother to try and clean it up.
- Riser

After the passing of Halley's Comet and the first wave of SURGE in the Boston area, Talon and his team became somewhat less active. Within two years, Talon largely disappeared from the Boston shadows, although some of his associates—like Pemberton—still operate there. Talon's current whereabouts and status are unknown.

- Which is how they're going to stay. Still, Fastjack only let me in here on the prospect that I be at least a *little* forthcoming, so here are some things to consider: Two of the people Talon ran with in Seattle became Dunkelzahn's watchers. Although not specifically named in the dragon's will, Talon later began working with Assets, Inc., one of Dunkelzahn's personal teams of shadow operatives, during which time he saw things few humans have ever encountered. He was later chosen by Lofwyr to serve as the dragon's stalking-horse in a competition with his brother Alamais in Europe, and rewarded with a gift containing part of an ancient magical relic.

Starting to see a pattern? How about this: during the passage of the Comet, with shedim appearing, Talon went into the depths of the metaplanes seeking the spirit of his long-dead lover. On his quest to some Place I can't even point toward, he talked about something moving past him, something vast and powerful and *old*, about hearing a roar of triumph through the ether and feeling a cold wind. That was the day Ghostwalker appeared from the DeeCee Rift.

Sometimes, you have no choice but to deal with dragons.

- Aracos
- Correct me as my recollection is a bit rusty, but doesn't "aracos" mean "hawk" in Gaelic?
- Ethernaut
- Yes, it does.
- Aracos

TOMMY TALON

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **M** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
 3 3 4 2 5 4 3 6 9 4 5.7 8 1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 8/6

Skills: Arcana 5, Assensing 5, Astral Combat 4, Blades (Dagger) 3 (+2), Conjuring skill group 6, Enchanting 3, Infiltration 2, Influence skill group 3, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols 3, Sorcery skill group 6, Unarmed Combat 2

Knowledge Skills: Catholic Church 3, Combat Biking 2, Great Dragons 2, Magical Artifacts 4, Magical Groups 5, Motorcycle Manufacturers 3, Runner Groups 4, Street Knowledge (Boston Shadows) 4 (+2), UCAS Politics 3, English N, Spanish 2, Sperethiel 2

Qualities: Focused Concentration, Magician (Hermetic Mage)

Initiate Grade: 5

Metamagics: Ally conjuration, centering (chant or gestures), cleansing, masking, shielding

Spells: Detect Magic, Heal, Levitate, Lightning Bolt, Magic Fingers, Manabolt, Mind Probe, Phantasm, Physical Barrier, Physical Mask, Stunbolt

Bound Spirits: Typically one Force 5 spirit of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water, each with 3 services.

Gear: Armor jacket [w/ carbon fiber saw sewn into right cuff], kit bag [fake IDs, ¥1,000 in hardcopy or certified cred, two trauma patches, personal articles], power focus (Rating 4, Dragonfang), goggles 2 [w/ image link, mage sight], weapon focus (Rating 5, Talonclaw)

Augmentations: Implanted commlink [custom: Response 6, Signal 5, Firewall 6, System 4], datajack

Weapons:

Colt America L36 [Light pistol, DV 4P, AP —, SA, RC —, 11(c), w/ laser sight]

Talonclaw [Dagger weapon focus, Reach —, DV 3P, AP 0]

Ally Spirit: Aracos [Force 4; Forms: golden hawk, silver wolf, Yamaha Rapier motorcycle; Powers: Astral Form, Banishing Resistance, Realistic Form, Sapience, and Sense Link; Skills Assensing 5, Astral Combat 4, Counterspelling 4, Dodge 4, Flight 4, Perception 4, Unarmed Combat 4]

Notes: These stats represent Talon at the peak of his career, around the time between the novels Ragnarock and The Burning Time. By the end of The Burning Time, Aracos has become a free spirit (p. 103, *Street Magic*).

WINTERHAWK

POSTED BY: FIANCHETTO

VITAL STATS: WINTERHAWK

Age: 37	Height: 1.77 m
Weight: 79.1 kg	Hair: Black/grey
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: Yes (Hermetic mage)

Winterhawk is a man with whom I identify, because both of us have a side of our personality that would be quite willing to sink into quiet academia, but the more adventurous side of ourselves will not let us be restful. Some of that is because the confines of ivy-covered brick and never-ending research become too stultifying. Another part of it is because the world is too damn interesting for us to sit back and not see what it holds for us.

The man who eventually became known as Winterhawk took a path into the shadows that was not planned but was nonetheless inevitable. He did not have a nightmarishly rough upbringing like some of us on this board, but he still had to fight for the things that he earned. Born Alexander King, the young Winterhawk bought into the notion that education was the path out of a hardscrabble life. His father died when he was one, while his mother was laid off from her receptionist job after a corporate merger. That left her to piece together a livelihood in Ipswich in any way she could. She had a SIN, but few other assets, and she was never able to catch on with a corp job. Alexander ran into the usual scrapes children in his situation face—gang pressures, offers to get into drug pushing, that sort of thing—but he managed to keep his nose clean and his grades up.

- Are we talking about actually keeping his nose clean, or just not doing enough to make the authorities feel they need to deal with him?
- Goatfoot
- More of the latter. Winterhawk is a rational man, generally not given to solving problems with violence if he doesn't have to, but that rationality also makes him realize that there are times when a careful application on force can improve your long-term safety. He wasn't the strongest child in his neighborhood, but he learned a thing or two about when to use force and how to make it count.
- Fianchetto

When he came of age, he earned a Zeta-Imp Chem scholarship to the University of East Anglia. His path, then seemed clear—university, chemical engineering job, a solid life that may be uneventful but also would not have any missed meals.

Then, in his freshman year, he Awakened.

Like most newly Awakened individuals, Winterhawk couldn't hide his talent, because he lit up on the astral like a firecracker. The university had a good supply of people who recognized what happened and were well aware of how they could make use of his talents. They started cautiously reaching out to him, letting him know that his life didn't have to follow the path that up until that point had seemed inevitable.

But something else woke up in Winterhawk along with that magical spark. For the first time in his life, he saw that he had something people wanted, and he understood the power that gave him. He wisely realized he didn't need to decide anything immediately, since he still had his Zeta-Imp Chem scholarship. He completed his general education under the Z-IC aegis, then he took action. He approached one of his suitors—the Draco Foundation—and told them he would conduct research on their behalf if they would get him out of Z-IC's clutches. He made sure to cut a deal that would not require him to take on a full-time job after graduation.

- This period in his life did a lot to shape Winterhawk's outlook on life. He didn't think he had changed much, but all of the sudden all sorts of people were interested in him. And their interest made them easy to manipulate. He probably had a decent dose of cynicism when he was Alexander King, but his adventures manipulating his suitors amped it up to a considerable degree. Luckily for all of us, his cynicism tends to make him more funny than bitter
- Pistons

Winterhawk's maneuvers worked. He switched his studies to Thaumaturgy, graduated, and steadfastly refused all offers or permanent employment that came his way. Instead, he took jobs that let him wander—guest lecturer here, researcher there, and of course mage-for-hire somewhere else. He assumed the name Winterhawk as a way of helping him build a personal brand, and it had the desired effect—his name is well known in magic circles, and he has reached the point where he can pick and choose the work he does based on what interests.

- I'd be blushing now, except I know this is not entirely true. Yes, I usually have a decent number of opportunities available to me, but the world is too complicated and entangled for me to just go wherever my interests take me. Like anyone who has been in the business long enough, there are some people who don't like me, and some people who are trying to rope me into work to take advantage of me. One quick example—I've heard some interesting things about a discovery down in Antarctica, and I'd love to take on a job to look into it, but from what I hear the mission could well bring me in contact with some Aztechnology teams, and I'm not on the best of terms with the Big A right now. I'm not saying I'm scared of them, but if I have to take on some of their combat mages, especially combat mages with a grudge, I'd rather it not be in the middle of a cold, vast wasteland.
- Winterhawk

One of Winterhawk's particular interests is how human affairs and other happenings affect the magical characteristics of a particular area. This curiosity caused him to embark on a recent expedition to the Deep Lacuna, some of which he talked about in the *Corporate Enclaves* posting. What he didn't mention, though, was that he was there, in a mini-sub, when spirits summoned by Caltech researchers were attacked. The sub he was in was about fifteen meters above the spirits, and everything seemed completely normal until the spirits just vanished. One of them had been maintaining a mindlink with Winterhawk just before it dissolved, and he has described the sensation as "something like having your brain rapidly pushed through a cheese grater." He says it all happened so quickly for the spirit to even register surprise, but he claims a snatch of music—something that sounded like a Mayan flute—came through the link before the end came. He refuses to say whether it was something the spirit heard, or just something it was thinking of before it went away.

- I told you that in confidence, Fian-o. I don't like to have thoughts or ideas like that put out until they're fully baked.
- Winterhawk
- Don't some ritual spellcasters like to use music to help the whole group stay focused and on the same page?
- Picador
- Like I said, my theorizing isn't completely finished yet, but that's certainly something that crossed my mind.
- Winterhawk



One of Winterhawk's other interesting recent investigations occurred at the Tunguska Crater. While I'll let him share his findings when he's ready, the part he might not tell involves an encounter with Yakut shapeshifters on his way out. It seems he and his fellow researchers didn't have the proper permits, and the local officials weren't happy. Now, this could have become a pitched battle, but that would have been a mistake—there was no telling how many shapeshifters were about, and Winterhawk didn't think there was any sense in irritating the Yakut government any more than he already had. Seeing as how he had just spent nearly a week studying the area's background count and its effect on the local flora and fauna, he decided to use his knowledge. He led the shapeshifters on a merry chase until he ran through a patch of jani fern, igniting it as he passed through. The patch was small enough that it was easy enough for the chasing shapeshifters to avoid, but Winterhawk had made sure they were downwind of the ferns, so they got a solid lungful of smoke. The hallucinogenic properties kicked in immediately, and Winterhawk was ready to back it up with a bevy of illusion spells. Ten hours later, Winterhawk and his crew were at the border, and a group of Yakut shapeshifters remained sitting in the bottom of the crater, staring at their hands, wondering how long it would take for the cluster of eyeballs in the middle of them to go away.

- So is there as much orichalcum around there as people say?
- Haze
- There's certainly a lot of it, and it's having a strong effect on the environment. Critters there are rather protective of the deposits, and their mutations make them capable of springing some unpleasant surprises on visitors. Bring both stun guns and knockout gas, because way too many of these beasts are immune to one or the other.
- Winterhawk

The question before Winterhawk now is how he will involve himself in the chase for artifacts occurring at different spots across the globe. Artifacts have not generally been his area of interest, but with all of the big magical parties in the world involved in this, it will be tough for him to not be involved. The fact that other people may know something that he doesn't could very well be enough to get him out of the door and on the artifacts chase.

- That, and the fact that there's a lot of money floating around out there. I adore knowledge, but I also adore food.
- Winterhawk

The problem with becoming involved in the artifacts chase is that the powers that are gathering in this area make it quite difficult to stay neutral. Independent operatives have been enlisted at various stages of this large game, but they are there to serve the agendas of powerful groups. Winterhawk could choose to involve himself as an independent operative, but that would mean losing the chance to truly study any of these artifacts—if he was able to obtain one, it would pass through his hands only briefly on the way to someone else for more detailed examination. If he wants to gain knowledge of these artifacts for himself, he is going to have to find some strong allies.

If this is the path he decides to follow, I would suspect that he will not ally with any one group, but will build his own coalition of independent, like-minded mages. His purpose would not be to directly take on something like the Draco Foundation—no ad hoc coalition could do that—but rather to gain leverage with them. Essentially, he would be sending them the message that the considerable resources of his new, magic-oriented group would be available to one of the bigs if they met his terms. Those terms would certainly include some quality time alone with the artifacts.

- Wait—are you saying that Winterhawk's thinking about creating his own magical version of Assets, Inc.?
- Mihoshi Oni
- He may be saying that, but I'm not. I've spent a lot of time around my fellow mages, and they're a temperamental bunch. They have a hard time agreeing with their own opinions, let alone those of someone else. Trying to lead a bunch like that is worse than being involved in politics. I have no interest in doing that kind of work.
- Winterhawk
- Then I take it this means that you are denying that you recently hosted a meeting of several runner mages, including our own Jimmy No and some of the mages you have trained? I do not, incidentally, believe that what Winterhawk is working on will be anything like Assets, Inc. It will be a looser coalition, in view of the independent-mindedness to which Winterhawk referred. While people may have their difference, much can be accomplished when they realize they have at least one common area of interest.
- Fianchetto
- I can't help but notice that neither Winterhawk nor Jimmy No responded to Fianchetto's comment.
- Kay St. Irregular

WINTERHAWK

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	4	5	4	5	5	6	4	11	10	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 5/3

Skills: Assensing 5, Blades 3, Con 3, Conjuring skill group 4, Enchanting 3, Etiquette (Academia) 4 (+2), Instruction 4, Leadership 5, Palming 2, Perception 4, Pilot Aircraft 3, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pistols 2, Sorcery skill group 6

Knowledge Skills: British Rock Music 4, Chemistry 2, Fashion 2, Magic Artifacts 3, Magic Groups 4, Magic Theory 4, Wines 4, World Geography 4, English N, French 3, Japanese 2, Sperethiel 2

Qualities: College Education, Focused Concentration, Magician, Perceptive

Initiate Level: 5

Metamagics: Cleansing, flexible signature, psychometry, quickening, shielding

Spells: Analyze Truth, Antidote, Armor, Chaotic World, Clout, Compel Truth, Control Emotions, Detect Enemies, Detect Magic (Extended), Enhance Aim, Flamethrower, Influence, Heal, Manaball, Physical Barrier, Powerbolt, Shattershield, Slay Troll, Spirit Zapper, Stealth, Stunbolt, Trid Phantasm

Gear: Cane (sustaining focus, Rating 4), commlink (Transys Avalon w/ Iris Orb, Response 4, Signal 4, Firewall 3, System 3), cufflinks (counterspelling focus, Rating 3), fake SIN (Rating 5), monocle [Rating 4, w/ flare compensation, image link, thermographic, vision magnification], Mortimer of London Berwick Line (suit jacket, trousers, shirt),

Weapons:

Colt America L36 [Light pistol, DV 4P, AP —, SA, RC —, 11 (c), w/ laser sight and personalized grip]

Knife [Blade, Reach —, DV 3P, AP —]



THE SIX TIMES I DIED

BY ROBERT WIELAND

The first time I died I was too young to remember much. It was images mostly. Impressions. Loud noises. I can flip through them like still photos or like a video where the sound is unable to sync. It could have been a dream. For any other baby, it would have been.

I remember a pistol. I remember the smell of oil. The safety was off. The first time I saw that model in the field I left the meet as soon as I could and cried in the car. It was the first and last time anything like that happened to me.

I remember my mother. She was not crying. Even when that pistol was inches away from her face. She spoke in an intense whisper. The kind of whisper she used when I angered her in public. She held me tightly. I heard her scream when she was knocked to the ground.

I remember teeth. An ork or troll tooth. My tiny hand tried to grab it out of his mouth. He spoke to me with a soothing voice but to others with a harsh one. I don't remember if it was his gun that was pointed at my mother.

I remember falling, falling for what seemed like days. The sky was tranquil. The clouds stopped to watch. Flashes of light

came from somewhere below me. Then I was held by strong arms again, and I felt armored fabric against my skin.

I remember dark hair. It was graying at the temples in that distinguished way of older gentlemen. Beneath the hair were eyes colder than my mother's. He spoke with a stern tone as he held me. He was not speaking to me. I started to cry.

I remember my mother calling me by name to soothe me. I do not remember what the name was.

This is a life filled with moments like these. An inch to the left. A second later. Fools brush them off as divine intervention or good luck. Survivors learn from these moments and are reborn every time.

I am a survivor.



The second time I died I don't recall the explosion. I couldn't tell you how many times the car flipped over. My mother threw her arm in front of me from the driver's side like she did every time she stopped suddenly. I find myself doing



that now, as an adult, even though I know talented engineers with millions of nuyen have developed crash prevention technologies far more advanced and useful than my arm.

I mostly remember the smell of burning plastic. It was a heavy hand covering my mouth. It squeezed hard, pinched my nose shut. I could barely suck air through the edges. My vision was blurry. My head throbbed with my eyes open. It was worse when they were closed. When they were closed, all I had was the smell. Not just plastic. Flesh.

“-king moron! You were supposed to stop the car, not wreck it!” said a distant voice.

“It’s stopped, neh?” said another.

My face was wet. Tears? Blood? Both. Mine? Mother’s? Both. Something heavy hit the side of the car. My head rattled with the sound of metal scraping on metal. Screaming in ways I could not. One of the voices spoke as he worked.

“Nightskys...have the...same alloy they...use in fighter planes.”

A final wrench and the door came open. The face that leered inside had silver-blue eyes that made me think of an insect. They don’t make cybereyes like that anymore. Not after Chicago.

“She’s a match. That facial recognition upload is working great.”

He reached his hand in for me. All I could do was watch. Polished chrome moving at a measured pace. A slim blade snapped from his wrist. The cool, flat metal slid along my throat. It slid under the shoulder belt and sliced the taut strap open. The blade flicked back inside as if it had never existed.

The cyberarm grabbed the shoulder of my school uniform

and pulled hard. Twice. Each time it did, I felt my mother’s arm tense and hold me close. Her face was a smear of blood and meat. I think her tongue was moving. But she was somehow still alive.

“I can’t get her free. Something ... she’s stuck. Something is holding her ... God damn it...”

The arm disappeared for a moment. I looked down at my mother’s arm. Shards of plastic and metal were buried into her flesh. I recognized it as living, human, despite the damage. And, somehow, she was still alive.

I felt my mother’s arm tense one final time. I did not hear the shot.



The third time I died I had been running for half a mile. It was night. It was cool. The rain in Seattle stopped for once. My knee was bleeding.

I noticed the window in my room was broken. Piece by piece, I carefully removed the broken glass until the hole was big enough to crawl through. The window was smaller than I thought. I was proud that I did not cry out.

When I had been in the trunk of the vehicle, I had paid careful attention to where we were going. I counted turns, tracked distance, and listened to any conversations I could hear. I hoped I knew where I was. If I was right, there was a Lone Star precinct a half a kilometer away. I had spent a night there once after I was dropped off by a previous set of captors.

I was out now, moving, concentrating so hard on where I was going that I was not paying any attention to where I was. I was in the middle of the street when I heard an engine. I

turned to look but was blinded by oncoming headlights. I put my hands in front of my face.

One of my captors came out of nowhere and scooped me into his arms. He was fast enough to reach me, but the car never slowed down. It hit us dead on at full cruising speed. I never heard brakes. The headlights did not swerve.

There was the terrible sound of metal against flesh stretched over metal. We rolled up over the car. His arms held me tighter. We slid off the roof onto the pavement. I was looking up at the woman in the passenger side of the car. Her face was slack with shock. I landed on my captor and his arms went limp.

He took the brunt of the impact. His laced bones and dermal plating kept me from additional harm. He arched his back as I stood up. The connection to his cyberarms was severed when his spine cracked in three places.

"G...guys...where are..." were his last words.

The other runners never came for their fallen comrade. I saw them in an alleyway that spilled onto the street. They were arguing with each other. They did so until they heard the sirens.

The couple that hit us stayed with us until Lone Star arrived. I stayed at the same station again. They remembered me from the last time. When the school administrators came, I threw a fit. I told them I didn't want to go home. They let me sleep in one of the empty cells. I returned to school in the morning.



The fourth time I died I was almost laughing by the end. Their plan was bold. Someone rolled a flash-bang grenade underneath the bathroom stall I was using in school. I never expected anyone to take me in school. I didn't look away in time. They led Mitsuhaman security forces on a merry chase. They shook their pursuers when they decided to drive on the bullet train tracks going the wrong way into a tunnel. To this day, I don't know if I was the actual target or if they were trying to discredit the school. Mitsuhaman withdrew its support two days after my kidnapping, and the school closed shortly thereafter.

I was lying inside a Bulldog van. I was bound, gagged, and listening to my captors arguing.

"How can we be lost?" said the one on the left. Whenever he spoke, the pink mohawk he wore shook with excitement.

"You said you knew how to get us to the drop point, Mittens," barked the one on the right. Close-shaved head. Sun reflecting off his mirrorshades.

"I didn't expect the detour through the train station, Bagman," said the one in the middle. He was tribal and an ork. When he spoke, his teeth made his consonants whistle. "Were you trying to kill us, Leadfoot?"

Leadfoot's mohawk shook. "I did figure that if they caught us, we were dead, so that may have informed my driving choices. Maybe if we just ping GridGuide..."

"If we reconnect to the Grid," said Bagman, "security will be back on us in no time. They must have this van's RFID info

thanks to our rather loud exit from school grounds. There has to be another way."

"We can't ask directions," said Mittens. "If we stop somebody, they might see the girl."

"Look, I know it's a few blocks away. We should keep moving," said Leadfoot.

"We need to dump this van and find a new vehicle," insisted Bagman.

"And what are we going to do with her while we jack a new ride?" asked Mittens.

Before they fell back into squabbling, I cleared my throat a few times.

"I think she has something to say, Mittens," said Bagman. We exchanged glances for a few moments. Somehow, that convinced him to take the gag out.

"Have you tried resetting the GridGuide system?" I asked. The looks on their faces appeared as if I had asked whether they tried fixing it with time travel.

"I know a hacker who might be able to get in," said Mittens, "but not hit the whole system."

"Not the whole system," I said. "The one in your car."

"I told you we should have waited until you got your rig installed," grumbled Bagman as he swatted Leadfoot.

"You can do it without a rig," I insisted. "It's actually probably easier. The chip in the car is how GridGuide knows where you are. If you can get it out of the housing, you can reset it, like a used car dealer does when it comes onto a lot. It only stays blank for a few moments, but it's long enough to plot a course between here and the safe house."

They stared at me with mouths wide open.

A five-minute job took twenty, but we were soon on our way to the safe house. The van turned the corner. Everyone inside cursed. At least half a dozen security vehicles were parked outside.

"Leadfoot," I asked, "you know this area?"

His pink mohawk bounced up and down again.

"How close are we to the lake?"

The last time I saw any of them alive, we were sailing through the air towards the lake. The escape was simple. I would swim one direction and they would swim in the opposite one. The van hit the water. I was flung forward into the glass and blacked out.



The fifth time I died I thought I would have been happier. Every spare favor and bit of cash I could manage to save went to buying information. The trail led me to a bar in the basement of a building somewhere north of Chicago. The bugs had come and gone, but people still remained. Refugees. Security guards. Mercenaries. Burnouts.

A pair of drunks scuttled away from the door. It shut behind me reluctantly. The bar was full of broken lives and dented stools. Everyone was staring off into space. Their drinks were mostly full. There was a low murmur from an ancient

sound system that soaked up the coughs, sobs, and scraping chairs. Nobody looked at me as I walked toward the bar.

He had his back to me. My AR confirmed his identity, but I didn't need it. I spent three days in his presence. I remembered every line of his face. He smelled the same. His hair was gray and wilder. He had long stopped being a professional shadow player, partly because of his missing his right arm. I approached him from that side and sat on the empty stool next to him.

"Didn't you have a cyberarm?" I leaned into him and spoke low.

"Sold it. Novatech stopped supporting Yamatetsu drivers when they changed their name. Worked fine for a while but then it kept glitching. Got a replacement lined up but the fixer bugged out with half the payment. Sold it to some young punk who thinks he's a real samurai now."

"Do you remember me?"

"You wouldn't be doing this if you didn't have backup somewhere."

"Correct. There are at least two people here who are paid very well to make sure I stay unharmed. Do you remember me?"

He smiled and nodded his head loosely. Those same cyber-eyes. Even without pupils I knew he couldn't look me in the face. He was looking around the bar to see if I was bluffing. Checking for anyone looking at us or suddenly frozen. Even after years out of the game, he still knew how to play.

"Do you remember me?"

"Johnson," he asked after a long pause. "Right?"

I made my move. The syringe came out of my sleeve, and I plunged it into his neck. I had hoped to put the drug in his drink, but he was not interested in drinking. He got to his feet. He took a moment to handle my backup. My bluff worked—I had none.

He was still so fast. He must have upgraded his wired reflexes. There was a blur, and I hit the floor hard. I barely realized that he pulled my chair out from underneath me until I was on the ground. My head was ringing as he loomed over me. He set the barstool over my neck. The crossbar was uncomfortably tight.

"Do you know why I don't drink?" he asked.

My vision blurred. I felt hot. He leaned on the stool and pressed it down on my neck.

"The night before a big run I got wasted. Bad. I was nervous, which led to drinking, which led to drugs, which led to me showing up in less-than-perfect condition. Everyone else was so pissed at me that when I got my new cybereyes with my cut, they told the street doc to put in the best toxic filter he could find."

I pushed up against the stool without much luck. His full weight was on it. My head throbbed. He was just a shape against the light at that point. My fingers were tingling. They brushed up against something plastic, something light. My brain came into razor-sharp focus. I wrapped my fingers around the syringe still jutting from his neck and pulled it out the hardest way I could.

He reeled away from me. It took what seemed to be hours for me to get to my feet. He was still on the ground. None of the other patrons moved. I drew a pistol and pulled myself up using the bar.

"Are you still alive?" I asked, pointing the pistol at him.

He nodded weakly. Blood seeped out from beneath his head.

"This is actually good news for you. If you answer my questions, I will get DocWagon down here to patch you up. Do you want to answer my questions?"

He weakly tried to get to his feet and failed. A moment later he nodded.

I sat on the stool he left empty. I sipped his drink. It was awful.

"Tell me my name," I said.



The sixth time I died it would have been worth it. For once, the pilot did not oversell his skill. We crept silently over the city like night itself. The only sound in the T-bird was the peculiar way the rigger cleared his throat when he dropped altitude. The green light came on, and the door hissed open. I took in a deep breath and stepped forward.

The wind rushed under me. My breathing was level. The chute deployed. My angle was a little high, but I hit the window perfectly. I tumbled forward into the penthouse and cut the chute. My momentum carried me into the dining room. I kept on my feet. Someone else was here, so I drew the pistol and flicked off the safety.

I held the pistol steady. It was silenced, but still loud enough to alert the guards. That was part of the plan. They would arrive on the scene to see their master slain. Would I stay to let them kill me? Would I go out the way I came on the slim hopes that the BASE jump I had never done before would work? The T-bird pilot knew I wouldn't be coming back—I paid his fee upfront.

The old man was in the kitchen, lit by the light from the refrigerator. The gray from his temples had won the battle with the rest of his hairline. He drank orange juice directly from the container, greedily. His eyes were closed. The hand that held the orange juice showed off a ring that was worth five figures on its own. He finished his drink and contemplated the container. As it tilted, the echoes of a Florida orange grove queued up in AR.

"As an assassin, you are a failure," he said.

"Can't I enjoy my work?"

He put the orange juice back on the shelf. "There is never any enjoyment in killing."

"Are you going to tell me it's just business?"

"No," he said as he looked at me. "It never is."

I thought I would tell him my name. But I didn't need to. He knew it. We locked eyes for two seconds and thirty years passed between us.

"My bodyguards will be here in a few moments. They will beat you to make themselves feel better. When you have recovered, call the office in Nagoya. Tell Ms. Niyoshi you wish to speak to the Regional Sales Manager. What am I to call you now?"

"Tess," I said. He nodded once. It was the only time I ever saw him bow his head.

WILLIAM "BULL" MACCALLISTER

POSTED BY: BULL

VITAL STATS: BULL

Age: 41 **Height:** 2.06 m
Weight: 159 kg **Hair:** Brown/grey
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Ork **Awakened:** No

- Okay, Uncle Bull, tell us a story! You promised!
 - Slamm-O!

 - Right. Story time. But I made the promise to share my story to FastJack, not you. So behave.
 - Bull

 - But I want to hear how you became the "Best Ork Decker You Never Met!"
 - Slamm-O!

 - You're never going to live that bit of hubris down, Bull.
 - Winterhawk

 - And tell us about the time you fought that giant wasp queen in Chicago! And how you met Lofwyr! And that time you saved the world by trapping an ancient, all-powerful spirit on Ares' Daedalus Orbital Platform and killed it by crashing the Platform to the ground!
 - Slamm-O!

 - Are you done now?
 - Bull

 - Oh, don't be so modest. I know all the things you did—I played the video game when I was a kid. It was one of my favorites. And I didn't even mention the time you and the Laughing Man had a duel and he killed your partner?
 - Slamm-O!

 - Drop it, Fred. Now.
 - Bull

 - Or that time that the Mayan Cutter killed your daughter? Or when j(*gb^G*bkjn--- *signal lost*
 - Slamm-O!

 - Oh, dear.
 - Netcat

 - Don't worry, he'll be fine. Barely. But 'Cat, you may want to keep a tighter rein on the little drekhead. There is only one reason he's still breathing right now, and that's because his mother saved my bacon once and I owed her one. He ever brings up Rebecca again, I've got a piece of black psychotropic IC that will have him thinking he's a twelve-year-old schoolgirl for the rest of his life.
 - Bull

 - Bull ...
 - FastJack

 - Yeah, yeah. Sorry. He had it coming though. *sigh* There's a grain of truth to most of those stories, but, like most things out on the street, they've been blown way out of proportion.
 - Bull

 - Holy shit! I just did a Matrix search, and there really is a video game! A whole series of them. "Bull the Ork Decker: Escape from Bug City", "Bull the Ork Decker: Ancient Terror", "Bull the Ork Decker vs The Jabberwocky", stuff like that. They're ancient, like fifteen years old. I'm not even sure they'll run on my commlink, but I'm gonna download them! Reviews to come!
 - /dev/grrl

 - And that, chummers, is just one reason why there are so many drekking outlandish stories. But that's getting ahead of myself. Let's start at the beginning, shall we?
 - Bull
- When FastJack said he was putting together this little dossier, I didn't say anything right away, because I'm the "new" guy to JackPoint. Some of you know me from the old Shadowland days, but most of you younger kids don't know me from Hatchetman, so I figured I'd go ahead and post this myself rather than waiting to see what kind of crazy drek got dug up. There's a lot of misinformation out there, and it can be a fraggin' nightmare to wade through.
- My name is William MacCallister, though I'm better known as either Bull or, more recently, simply MacCallister. I've been around the block a time or ten and have the scars to show for it. I got myself out of the game a handful of years back, so I initially turned 'Jack down when he invited me to join his little club. It's not often one of us gets the chance to retire. It's the ultimate dream, that one little sliver of hope that we all cling to that the cynicism, anger, hatred, and horror that comes with running the shadows can't quite beat out of us. And let me tell you, it was great while it lasted. I bought a farm somewhere in northern None-of-your-fraggin-business-ville with my wife and my kids. I missed Crash 2.0 because, believe it or not, I wasn't logged on that day. I was playing baseball with my son. It was a good life. It was a dream. I never wanted it to end.
- And it was exactly that: a dream, and dreams always fragging end. If there's one lesson to take away from anything you read here, it's that: Dreams always end.
- And I thought I was cynical. I agree with this, but still. Damn.
 - Pistons

My story is fairly typical. My parents were killed by the Alamos 20,000 attack on the Sears Tower in 2039, along with thousands of others. In the confusion, I was presumed dead as well. When you're seven years old, no one knows you're still alive, and you have no active SIN? Life kinda sucks. Also, I was human back then. Shocker, I know. I goblinized a few years later, and life just started to suck even more. You think racism from Humanis, Alamos, or Renraku upper management is bad, you should try a group of twelve-year-old orphans.

So yeah, I have the generic Hard Luck Story #3. I was destined to become either a criminal or Batman, and since my parents didn't leave me a billionaire, my choice was pretty easy. And I look fraggin' ridiculous in tights.

- You certainly would. And you're more of a Spider-Man kind of guy Bull. Constant hard-luck story.
- FastJack
- FastJack, on the other hand, could probably pull off the spandex look. Considering some of the fashion from the '50s, I'd be surprised if he hadn't tried it once or twice!
- Kat o' Nine Tales

I fell into the shadowrunning biz the same way most of you did. I started running with an Amerind Coyote shaman named Johnny 99, and we set out to make a name for ourselves on the streets of Chicago. We succeeded, but not in the way we intended. For that first year, it seemed like everything we did, we did the wrong way. The mistakes we made, and the things we learned from them, shaped our careers for the next decade.

We learned early (and often!) that making enemies and pissing people off just causes more problems down the line. It seemed like ever time we thought someone was dead, they would show up on our doorstep with a flash-bang hidden inside a pizza box. It was a comedy of errors that finally culminated in what we called "the video," and was later followed up with by "the game." I'm not proud of any of this, but you have to live with the consequences of your actions.

- Trigger-happy runners are frequently dead runners. Steal from a corp, that's business as usual, and something most corps usually just accept. Especially since they operate in the same way. But start killing a bunch of security guards or blow up a lab? Now you're costing them money beyond what the loss of their stolen item, data, or employee would cost them. Death benefits, pensions, rebuilding, the collateral loss of additional research and prototypes. This all costs the corp a lot more money, and it's the kind of thing that will get you red-flagged—added to a corp's shit list and unemployable, at least by them. Still, it's better than them hunting you down.
- Winterhawk

During a run to recover a kidnapped girl, I managed to deck my way into a secure system the bad guys had set up, and I gained access to the

operational funds set up by their corporate masters. Like any good decker, I saw this as a chance to get an extra payday, and I swiped it. Then I decided to cover my tracks by making it look like the leader of the little group had swindled Aztechnology out of a sizeable chunk of nuyen. I wasn't nearly as good as I thought I was, though, and the bad guy figured it out. So he set out to get revenge on us by kidnapping friends, contacts, and loved ones, and then making us follow riddles and clues while surviving a bunch of death traps. On top of that, he trideo-recorded the entire thing. You can still find it on most file-sharing sites.



It was pretty ridiculous. We were setting off explosives, jumping off bridges, and chasing our tails all around Chicago. Funny thing is though, that video did more for our rep than over a year of shadowrunning. Say what you want about being a cool, calm professional, but sometimes Mr. Johnson is looking for someone not afraid to be a little crazy and try something dangerous.

- Bull's being coy here. That "bad guy" was none other than Kyle Morgan, one of the top assassins in the world during the '50's, and the only one who had a dragon for a partner. Kyle messed with Bull for years, putting the screws to him on a regular basis. I have no doubt that he could have killed Bull and his partner had he chosen to, but he got a perverse pleasure out of making them jump through hoops.
- Winterhawk
- Yeah. Fortunately, we managed to come to terms with each other and declare a peace a couple years before he was killed. And despite what everyone seems to think, I didn't have anything to do with that. If he wasn't such a ruthless, cold-blooded killer, I think we could have even become friends. I'm glad Perianwyr is out of the assassination game now, though. The music biz suits him much better.
- Bull
- Who says he's completely out of it?
- Snopes

A few years later, a series of Matrix games was released. I never managed to track down who was responsible, but it seemed to be in the same vein as "the video," so I always assumed it was that same individual. The games were wildly exaggerated versions of a number of jobs that we did over the years, amped up to the nth degree, and usually making me out to look like a drekhead. We'd pretty well established our rep by that point, so they didn't really impact our business much. Though I've never managed to quite live down some of the more ridiculous things from them.

- Okay, the graphics on these things are horrendous. And I had to download a couple emulator programs to get them to run. But the games are actually a lot of fun. But Ghost are they deadly! I've never played a game where you could actually get killed on the start screen! Whoever created these really liked seeing Bull get killed. Wendigo Bull was a lot of fun to play, though. One question though. You're a hacker, right? So why does every game have assault cannons as your default weapon?
- /dev/grrl
- It's not like hackers can't also be heavy weapons specialists, you know. I work with several.
- Black Mamba
- It's something of a joke. I was very, very fond of the big booms, and after a couple close calls with some particularly big and nasty experimental cybernetic para-beasties, I got a bit paranoid and started collecting Panther Assault Cannons, making certain there was one nearby at any given moment.
- Bull

We were inside Bug City when the CZ went up. I'd encountered the bugs a couple times prior to that, and I've since heard folks say that we should have seen it coming, but really there was no way to know. One day, it was biz as normal, the

next we were in hell. There's really no other way to describe it. Me, Johnny, our friends, and our family were trapped in there for a year. We lost some good people during that time. Everyone did. I made a deal with the devil to get out, and never even knew it.

After that I moved around a bit. Got more involved in the shadow community. Made a lot of friends on Shadowland, and a lot of contacts in the biz. Then my deal with the devil came back to bite me on the ass, and some of my team died, including Johnny. By that point, I'd survived the shadows for over a decade. I took my family, took my savings, and cashed out. I found a place where everything wasn't paved, where there was trees and fresh air. Where there were no gangs or mob goons or corp sec guards trying to geek me. I foolishly thought I'd attained my dream, even if my best friend wasn't around to see it.

- Deal with the devil? Want to explain that one?
- Netcat
- Not particularly. Let's just say that some day, this particular devil has a date with a magazine of Panther Assault Cannon rounds.
- Bull

I have two children. Had. Had two children. Dammit. I had two children, Rebecca and William, Jr., twins. One day they approached me and told me they wanted to move to Seattle. Reba had finished high school and wanted to enroll in the University of Washington. Billy, meanwhile, wanted to become a shadowrunner, and he wanted to do it in Seattle. They'd made up their minds and were old enough that there wasn't much I could do to stop them.

Billy is a hacker, and he is good. Better than I was at that age, and I think he'll be better than me someday, probably someday soon. Reba was magically active, a mage, but I thanked god she wasn't going into the biz. "Geek the mage first" isn't just a cute saying, and she never really had the temperament to be a shadowrunner anyway. She wanted to study ork culture, learn about her heritage and maybe try to help out other orks. The Ork Underground in Seattle fascinated her.

- A bit dangerous to post your children's names in public like this, isn't it?
- Beaker
- Reba, well, read on. Billy, on the other hand, is too damn proud of me for his own good. Stupid kid. He doesn't make any secret of the fact that he's my son, and likes to brag he'll take my so-called title as "Best Ork Decker." He runs under the handle Tauren, if you're in Seattle and need a drek-hot decker.
- Bull
- I know you're old and fear change Bull, but the terminology has evolved. It's hacker now, not decker. Don't be so old-fashioned.
- Pistons
- Bah. Snot-nosed kids who bought their commlink and pirated all their programs from some crappy shareware site, but don't know a CPU from a Megapulse? Those are hackers. They don't have a clue how to sling code. As far as I'm concerned, anyone who knows what they're doing when it comes to tripping the Matrix, they're deckers. Besides, the term hacker is almost a century old. Talk about old-fashioned.
- Bull

- I don't think Bull is ever going to change. He still carries his ancient cyberdeck case with it. Rumor has it there's a cutting edge commlink inside the case, though.
- Winterhawk

So with the kids moving to Seattle, I decided to follow. I wasn't going to start running again, though. I'm too damn old. Everything pops, crackles, and snaps when I stand up in the morning. Things ache that I never knew could ache. Shadowrunning is a young man's game, and I've never been one to be a "decker-in-a-box," so that option was out. But, after looking a few old friends up, I realized that my experience could be used in another way. There's a never-ending need for fixers in Seattle. And it would let me keep an eye on Billy. So I started setting up runs, focusing on some of the new talent in Seattle.

That's when the dream shattered. Not because of our business, though. Something stupid, something mundane. A serial killer terrorized Seattle for over two years before Knight Errant took him down. Less than six months later, a copycat picked up where the Mayan Cutter left off, and Rebecca was one of his first victims. She was living down in the Ork Underground, putting together a paper on the history of the Underground. If I could have gotten the original gang together, I'd have hunted the fraggin' son of bitch down myself. Instead I turned to the talent I had started working with and had them bring him to me alive. I let my wife pull the trigger.

- I hadn't heard about that, Bull. My condolences. Rebecca was a sweet kid.
- Pistons

After that, I picked up some of Rebecca's work, researching the history of the Underground. I was also approached by

the Ork Rights Committee, a group that Rebecca had joined and had been working with in a campaign to get the Ork Underground recognized as a full district of Seattle, something the city has been desperately fighting. I can't prove it yet, but there's a connection there to Rebecca's death. I know it.

So that's my story. Make of it what you will. Despite everything, I'm back in the shadows, back among you miserable lot of backstabbing scum and slime. Right where I belong.

- Bull's been making waves in the Seattle political scene as of late, trying to get the ORC's "Project: Freedom" initiative pushed through. Project: Freedom would officially make the Underground a district of Seattle and entitle it to tax money, enabling it to put in actual roads, fund hospitals, and get them added to the city's Knight Errant contract. It's an expensive proposition, and the city is already cash-strapped, but the ORC has managed to put enough pressure on Brackhaven and the government to get it put on this year's ballot.
- Kat o' Nine Tales
- It's looking to be an ugly fight, and Bull's been doing a lot of hiring to help the ORC's cause. The government doesn't want the expense or the mess that will come with the Ork Underground becoming an official district of the city, and even many of the residents of the OU aren't fond of the idea. They're pretty happy being mostly ignored. Right now, it's a criminal paradise because Knight Errant won't venture down there without a really good reason and direct orders from their superiors, because they claim that the Ork Underground isn't part of their contract.
- Snopes
- Of course the government doesn't want the OU to get any official status. Brackhaven filled the ranks with his fellow bigots. They'd prefer to see it filled in with concrete, with all the filthy trogs still in it.
- Butch

BULL

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
8	4	5 (8)	6	5	4	6 (9)	4	6	3.5	9 (12)	4

Condition Monitor (P/S): 12/10

Armor (B/I): 8/6

Active Skills: Athletics skill group 4, Automatics 4, Automotive Mechanic 3, Close Combat skill group 4, Computer 6, Cybercombat (IC) 6 (+2), Data Search 6, Dodge 5, Electronic Warfare 6, Etiquette (Matrix) 5 (+2), First Aid 3, Hacking 6, Hardware 6, Heavy Weapons (Assault Cannon) 5 (+2), Leadership 4, Longarms 4, Negotiation 5, Perception 4, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pistols (Revolvers) 5 (+2), Software 6, Stealth Group 4

Knowledge Skills: Chicago Area 5, Chicago Street Gangs 4, Comic Books 4, Computer Hardware 5, Computer Software 6, Corporate Security 4, Insect Spirits 6, Matrix Security 6, Ork Underground 4, Seattle Area 3, Police Procedures 3, Seattle Street Gangs 2, Seattle Politics 4, Shadowrunner Lore 6, 20th Century Sci-Fi 4, English N, Sioux 3, Japanese 3, Spanish 2

Qualities: Aptitude (Hacking), Exceptional Attribute (Logic), Allergy (Moderate, Gold)

Augmentations: Datajack x2, Cerebral Booster 3, Encephelon 2, Math SPU, Mnemonic Enhancer 3, Synaptic Booster 3, Simsense Booster, Smartlink (all Betaware)

Commlink: System 9, Response 8, Firewall 10, Signal 7, Armor Case 10, Biometric Lock (electro shocker), Customized Interface, Hardening 6, Simsense Accelerator, Response Enhancer 6

Programs: Analyze 8, Armor 9, Attack 9, Black Attack IC 9, Black Hammer 9, Blackout 9, Bio-Feedback Filter 8, Browse 6, Command 7, ECCM 7, Edit 6, Empathy 6, Encrypt 6, Exploit 6, Medic 6, Scan 8, Sniffer 6, Stealth 9, Track 6

Gear: Armor jacket, AR contacts (w/ image link, thermographic vision, vision magnification, vision enhancement 3)

Weapons:

Ruger Super Warhawk [Heavy pistol, 6P, -6 AP, 0 RC, 6(cy), w/ APDS ammo, custom grip, biometric lock (immobilization), smartlink]

Panther Assault Cannon [Assault cannon, 10P, -5 AP, 1 RC, custom grip, biometric lock (immobilization), smartlink]

HANNIBELLE

POSTED BY: SUNSHINE

VITAL STATS: HANNIBELLE

Age: 28 **Height:** 1.87 m
Weight: 75 kg **Hair:** Grey, such as it is
Eyes: White **Gender:** Female
Metatype: Ghoul **Awakened:** Yes (Infected)

- I thought for a long time before I allowed Sunshine to make this contribution. I realize the damage it could do, and the possible risk to Hannibelle. I'm not letting him do this because I want to publicly shame Hannibelle—I'm putting it up because I think JackPoint functions the best when we're all on the level with each other. When we can be clear and honest about what we're doing and what we've experienced, we're better off. If that means some unpleasant things need to be aired so that we can go ahead and talk about them, then so be it.
- Fastjack

I think for a minute we need to be clear about what it is we're doing here. We've got kind of the atmosphere of a campfire going here, where we swap stories back and forth, each more outrageous than the last, and we pretend we're relaxed and having fun. But what we're really doing is cracking the carefully constructed shells many people have built, prying into things they deliberately hid, and airing their secrets for our entertainment.

If it sounds like I feel guilty for what I'm about to do, that's because I do. But if what we're doing here is sharing remarkable stories, then this one fits the bill.

I can't reveal all of Hannibelle's secrets, because she's managed to keep them out of my reach. Her real name is one of them. She didn't adopt her current moniker until after she was infected, and somewhere in the past she managed to bury her identity so thoroughly that I couldn't find it.

While the name appears to be lost, facts about her past are not. She may have been able to hide the paper and Matrix trails leading to her name, but when you're distinct (as she definitely is), the one thing you can't do is erase the memory of you from other people's minds. I was able to find several of her previous acquaintances, and interviews with them helped me piece together information about her past that she had told them.

So let's start with one thing Hannibelle tries to avoid talking about: She got her start with Tamanous. That's right, she's a ghoul who worked for organleggers. If she were a technomancer too, she would be the living embodiment of some of the basest fears of humanity.

- She's as much to blame for being a ghoul as TMs are for being what they are. Anyone who would hold that against her is a bigot. It's only the association with Tamanous, which was the result of her own actions, that I'd hold her accountable for. The other thing is just something that happens, and she should not be shunned for it.
- Netcat
- An abomination does not become any less abominable just because it's acting out of its nature. You can talk about ghoul rights or anything you like, but in the end, their hunger for flesh will still be there.
- Clockwork

As is the case with many Tamanous workers, Hannibelle was recruited through desperation and maintained her employment through shame. As a young ghoul on the streets of Seattle, well before there was any effort to recognize the rights of the Infected, she had trouble getting by. Her parents were dead, government agencies wanted nothing to do with her, no homeless shelter would take her, and she had no real marketable skills. All she had was a burning hunger, a quick mind, and her father's cyberdeck, which he had passed to her just before he died in gang crossfire. Luckily—or maybe not so luckily, depending on your perspective—that was all she needed for Tamanous to be able to make use of her. Getting their hooks in was not difficult—Tamanous has a pretty good supply of fresh human flesh, and dangling food in front of a starving ghoul was enough to get her to do just about anything.

In the beginning, they didn't ask for much. Her commlink was not a known Tamanous channel, and as far as they knew no one was monitoring it, so it was a clean way to pass along messages. That's all she did for a time, and while their payments were small enough that her hunger was not satisfied (it never is, of course, for a ghoul), she at least received enough food to stay alive.

- The thing to remember about an organization like Tamanous is that everything they do is tainted by the nature of their work. Passing along messages seems innocuous enough, until you remember that a lot of those messages are about pinpointing people who would be expendable and not missed if they disappeared, or messages about bidding wars between the wealthy for the rights to a particular organ. These are messages that lead to deaths.
- Goatfoot

Working for Tamanous has a way of preventing people from seeking other employment. You don't go about listing them on a résumé or naming them as a reference, and working with them has a way of making people feel tainted, which in turns make them believe they don't deserve to be doing anything better. So they get stuck into a rut of organlegging.

It didn't help Hannibelle that her involvement with Tamanous deepened over time. Once a clean cyberdeck starts engaging in illegal activities, it doesn't stay clean for long, and Hannibelle found herself having to go to a little extra effort to pass her messages along. She learned the basics of encryption, redirection, covering her tracks, and other tricks to staying hidden in the Matrix. She had a knack for it, and it helped that her father's old deck was a pretty good one. Hannibelle tinkered with the deck, figuring what was critical, and what was disposable. Her tinkering explored the various methods of broadcasting data over networks to keep surveillance guessing—hardwired connections, shortwave

and other low-bandwidth radio frequencies, point-to-point lasers, and so forth. Tamanous tried to keep her too busy for other work, while the fact that she was a ghoul with Tamanous connections made others avoid her and kept her from finding alternate income streams. She got good enough to break free of Tamanous' clutches anyway—which they realized when she pulled off a spoof that sent them on a chase through some of the hardest nodes, most capricious pathways, and otherwise inconvenient sites that she continues to exploit in order to stay invisible.

◦ Let this be a lesson, kids. It may be more efficient and easier to do whatever you want with your little toys, but there's something to be said for the old ways. There were all sorts of ways to conceal and obfuscate your work and identity before UMS 2.0 came along. Now, it's all the same. You can't bounce message off standalone voice, data, rigging, and Matrix networks in order to keep The Man off your hoop. It's easier to escape and evade in the forest than the desert.

◦ Bull



- It's not an issue if they never knew you were there, old man.
- /dev/grrl

Internal pressure started to build in Hannibelle. She knew she wanted to change her life, but she could not conceive of how that would be accomplished. She wanted to move on to greener pastures, and she was well aware that her reputation—and efforts by her colleagues to spread that reputation—was keeping her in Tamanous' clutches. Things were going to come to a head, and they did. It got ugly, Hannibelle's family was dragged into it, but by the time it was done, Hannibelle had finally dissociated herself from Tamanous.

- So I have to ask—is this stuff about Tamanous supposed to be the big reveal here? Look, Hannibelle's never been exactly open about her Tamanous connections, but it's been pretty apparent to anyone with even a little bit of a gift for reading between the lines. I don't consider this to be news.
- Pistons
- Doesn't anyone ever read through an entire document before commenting? There's more.
- Sunshine

Hannibelle then entered the open market as a hacker with a particular skill for disguising data trails and hiding information that clients wanted hidden. This is the type of work that can easily be done from a remote location, which is exactly how Hannibelle prefers it. She knows how people react to her appearance, so she's happy to avoid face-to-face meetings if she can.

Let's face it, within a group that includes FastJack and The Smiling Bandit, it is not an uncommon trait for the elite among us to refuse meeting face-to-face, and there isn't always a pressing need for it. Hannibelle is among that esteemed class who doesn't need to travel the globe to support a team operating in Kiev, or to clean the electronic forensics of a Philadelphia fixer with the IRS on her ass. She has mastered Matrix stealth and deception through a combination of means. The first is that she is clearly a very skilled hacker who understands the intricacies of datatrails, routing, and all manner of tracking. The second is that her experience in tinkering, deconstructing, and reconstructing both hardware and software has given her a strong programming skillset to aid in that natural skill. Finally, as she has hinted on JackPoint, Hannibelle has a rather thorough knowledge of Matrix topography, and knows the best places and routes in which to disguise or dissuade hard pursuits.

- For someone who rarely ventures from her haven, Hannibelle has accumulated an impressive roster of tutors or mentors or whatever you call men like Grid Reaper. Same goes for how she knows all those blind spots and chokepoints—nice to have help from a fallen GOD.
- Clockwork
- I think I know who you mean. He was a fed, not a corpcop.
- Pistons

Once she was free of Tamanous, Hannibelle's reputation started to improve. She was skilled and honest, never falling into the trap of copying the data she was supposed to be concealing

and looking for opportunities to sell it for a little extra side money. She started handling an increasing flow of work, and since she was able to work several jobs simultaneously from her remote location, she got to know several shadowrunners. With her new reputation for honesty and her growing network of contacts, she became a person that others would turn to when they wanted an evaluation of someone-or-other's talent. Once people start asking you about how different individuals may work together, and what you think about this-and-such team, it's a short step to becoming a fixer.

As a fixer, she displayed the same honesty she did as a hacker. If she makes a recommendation for someone to do a run, it's not because she owes that person a favor, or because that person paid her off to get the recommendation. It's because she feels that person is best suited to the job, period. Her evaluations are solid, and she has a good understanding of team chemistry.

- As might be expected, she's especially good at integrating infected runners into a team. She knows how to sell people on their merits and overcome any fears they might have about working with them. She doesn't try to guilt a team into taking on an infected—instead, she develops a summary of the runner's abilities and past experience, pitching that runner in a way that makes the team eager to hire the newcomer on. Once they find out that the candidate is infected, they only pause briefly because they're so eager to have their abilities as part of their team.
- Stone

So where's the scandal? This reads like a standard redemption story so far—ghoul gets desperate, falls into trouble, overcomes trouble, makes a good life for herself.

Except the story doesn't end there. In any redemption story, the possibility of a backslide exists. And that's what we have here.

I will stipulate that I am in no position to judge Hannibelle. I have no idea what it feels like to be a ghoul. I don't have to watch every person I encounter recoil away from me. I don't have to live with the burning that possesses ghouls if they are not properly fed, a feeling I've heard described like flaming acid eating you from the inside. I freely admit that I don't know how bad she's had it.

What I do know is that after staying away from Tamanous for a while, Hannibelle found herself reaching out to them. In some respects, it would seem insane not to. She stays inside most of the time, avoids metahuman contact, and there just aren't that many organizations out there who have both regular access to recently dead flesh and a delivery network that can get the flesh where it needs to go. She resisted for years, but then she reached back out to her Tamanous contacts and asked if they could bring her food. She did not have to trade favors this time. She was in a position to pay them well for the simple task of bringing her parts that no one else wanted. So the arrangement was made, and deliveries have been made ever since.

There are many justifications that could be made. Tamanous is not performing any extra jobs for her—they are just giving her some of their leftovers. No one is dying simply to feed her, which is possibly better than if she were fending for herself. And her association with Tamanous is divorced from her other work, and does not affect her fixing efforts at all.

The simple fact of the matter, though, is that Tamanous is doing something for her that they generally don't do. She is

paying for it, yes, but providing the service in the first place is a favor to her. Tamanous is not the kind of organization that provides favors without expecting some form of eventual payment. They will ask her for something in the future. All I can say is, I wouldn't want to be one of her regular runners when it comes time for that favor to be repaid.

- You acted like you were going to dispassionately report facts, and then you end on this irresponsible note of pure speculation. Anyone I've worked with knows I can be trusted, and knows I will take care of them. None of that will change.
- Hannibelle
- That really doesn't sound much like an explanation to me.
- Goatfoot
- I don't believe I have anything to explain.
- Hannibelle
- I'm with you. Look, the lady's going above and beyond the call of duty. She's keeping herself fed, she's not hurting anyone, and she's treatin' her runners right. So some of you don't like Tamanous. I don't care.
- Kane

- When Kane endorses the morality of your thought process, it's time to think again.
- Winterhawk
- Just to play devil's advocate for a moment (no offense, lass), I might suggest that Hannibelle actually prefers to continue this arrangement with Tamanous. She already ditched them once, and without a fight. I don't know of many people in the trafficking business, especially in a network like this one, that just let people walk away. These are the most vindictive about "traitors" because they can least afford leaks or blackmail. Ones that agree to up and deliver take-out for said traitor have an agenda that quid pro quo cannot satisfy. Bull's earlier comment raises a good point, and physical surveillance countermeasures have given way to enhanced signal deception and disinformation. Tamanous doesn't need food—they have more warm bodies that even an exemplary fixer network could provide. They do have enemies aplenty, and this is war. All warfare is based on deception, and they have one of the best on their side. She is a ghoul, and nothing is going to change that. That doesn't mean, however, that she can't act to keep these organlegger monsters from doing more harm than is already being done. Of course she could just be a cold-blooded monster, in which case her runners are already being used to facilitate a grand feast of long pig.
- Thorn

HANNIBELLE

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
6	3	4	7	2	6	6 (9)	5	6	3.1	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11

Armor (B/I): 6/4

Skills: Automotive Mechanic 3, Clubs 3, Cracking skill group 6, Disguise 2, Dodge 3, Electronics skill group 6, Instruction 2, Intimidation 3, Leadership 3, Longarms (Shotguns) 3 (+2), Perception 3 (6), Pilot Aircraft 2, Pilot Ground Craft 3, Survival 3

Knowledge Skills: Dwarf Anatomy 3, Elf Anatomy 2, Human Anatomy 4, Ork Anatomy 3, Troll Anatomy 3, Matrix Security Design 5, English N, Japanese 1, Or'zet 3, Spanish 2, Sperethiel 2

Qualities: Allergy (Sunlight, Mild), Dietary Requirement (Metahuman Flesh), Dual Natured, Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell), Exceptional Attribute (Logic), Natural Weapon (Claws, Reach —DV 5P, AP —)

Augmentations: Cerebral booster 3, commlink (implanted, custom, Response 7, Signal 5, Firewall 7, System 6), control rig, cybereyes [Rating 4, w/ flare compensation, low-light vision, smartlink, thermographic vision, vision enhancement 3, vision magnification], simrig

Programs: Analyze 5, Armor 4, Attack 5, Biofeedback Filter 5, Black Hammer 4, Browse 4, Command 6, Decrypt 6, Defuse 4, Disarm 4, ECCM 5, Exploit 4, Encrypt 6, Scan 5, Sniffer 5, Spoof 6, Track 5

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 9), armor vest, 2 x fake SInS (Rating 5), atmosphere sensor, 2 x Aztechnology Cruiser [w/ rigger adaptation, weapon mount (normal, external, fixed, remote)], latex face mask (Rating 5), miniwelder, satellite link, 5 x Shiawase Kanmushi [w/ chameleon coating, retrans unit, rigger adaptation], 10 x security RFID tags, 20 x standard RFID tags, 10 x stealth RFID tags, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (shotgun), tag eraser,

Weapons:

Defiance T-250 [Shotgun, DV 7P, AP -1, SA, RC 1, 5(m), w/ foregrip, smartgun system]

Stun baton [Club, Reach 1, DV 6S(c), AP -half]

HANS BRACKHAUS

POSTED BY: STONE

VITAL STATS: HANS BRACKHAUS

Age: Unknown	Height: Varies
Weight: Varies	Hair: Grey or Black
Eyes: Black, Grey, Blue	Gender: Male
Metatype: Varies	Awakened: No

Hans Brackhaus might be one person, several people, a great dragon, or all of the above. What Hans Brackhaus definitely is, though, is the kind of ghost story that runners and corporate managers alike tell their kids at night. He's the ultimate bogeyman of the business. As a result, the stories can get pretty wild and it can be damn hard to keep a firm handle on the truth. What doesn't help is that I can confirm that more than one Saeder-Krupp company man has adopted the Brackhaus handle, and that's without counting false-flag operations where the Johnson wants you to *think* he works for S-K, when he doesn't. There is, of course, the rumor that Hans Brackhaus is a name used by Lofwyr himself when he wants to take human form (different from his customary form, of course) to micro-manage his operations. But a rumor's not a rumor that doesn't die, and this one has been kicking around for decades. Everyone knows not to deal with a dragon—although in practice it can be quite lucrative—but here's another axiom that's just as important: don't fuck with Mr. Brackhaus.

This post is my own personal Hans Brackhaus ghost story. And hopefully it will go a long way towards explaining why I've compiled this dossier on Brackhaus, his interests and methods, and all the different things the Brackhaus name can mean.

I have worked for a Hans Brackhaus at least three times in my career. The first time was back in 2061 at the end of the probe race. Back then I was still pretty green, green enough to think that I was untouchable, that I'd seen everything the shadows had to show me.

Would you be shocked to learn I was wrong?

My team had spent most of the year in Europort on retainer for a regular Mr. Johnson, whom our decker didn't have much trouble tracing back to Saeder-Krupp. We'd done a few protection jobs, and a few industrial espionage jobs, mainly against Proteus, to give S-K a foothold in the probe race. But in general I got the impression that we were functioning in a support role, as a B Team, as cavalry being held in reserve until the shit hit the fan.

And then the shit hit the fan.

We got a call from our Johnson to get our asses to an Arianespace/S-K headquarters immediately and extract a high-level S-K exec, a dwarf named Lukas Grey, in charge of

Saeder-Krupp's External Security. We were about a block away from the Arianespace building when our shaman spotted the first signs of weirdness. He said that the astral space around the large comms antennae on top of the office tower was completely overcharged and throwing off sparks. He said it looked like mana was flowing through it somehow, more mana than it could handle.

We didn't think too much about it. We had a job to do.

The guards at the front-door desk had been knocked unconscious or dead. It looked like the work of a professional shadow team. The entire building was in an uproar, and we wanted to be out of there before we had to answer any uncomfortable questions from the local fuzz. Our decker detected the signal from Grey's RFID personal data transmitter in the basement. The building wasn't supposed to have a basement, so rather than try to hack our way into the security node, we just forced open the doors and rappelled down the shaft.

What we saw down there, I still have nightmares about to this day. It was some kind of a laboratory. Our hacker said it looked like a remote launch-control room, like the kind they had at Ares Space. The entire center of the room was taken up by an enormous machine, descending from a nest of wires and conduits in the ceiling down to some kind of throne in the center of the room. Dead Saeder-Krupp security sprawled on the floor, torn apart even though they were wearing full armor. And then there were the sacrifices, forming some kind of a ritual circle surrounding the platform, bound and gagged, butchered and bled.

All of them were children.

To say that the astral space around the basement was all wrong would be an understatement. Whatever it was, our shaman saw it first. Until then, he'd been a rock. Apparently, just perceiving it on the astral was enough to make him go catatonic. I had wished for astral sight myself, in the past, as an extra edge on some of the runs I'd been on. This made me grateful I was mundane.

The thing that Grey's transmitter was still implanted in wasn't even metahuman any more. Certainly it was no dwarf. Its body had fused with the machine and grown completely out of control. Strands of tissue merging with wires to form tentacles that it had used to tear apart, penetrate, and feast on the security guards and scientists who sprawled on the floor. We forgot about the extraction, the run, everything but our own survival.

We opened fire and kept firing until absolutely nothing in that room but us was moving. When we made it back up the elevator shaft and out, we'd lost our decker and our shaman. We made it out of the police cordon and tried to contact our original Mr. Johnson. We got nothing. In fact, all of our Europort contacts had dried up.

I don't have the scientific or magical background I'd need to speculate on what happened in Europort. Any subsequent conversations I've had with gearheads and mages haven't helped.

But if you want to hear some wild-ass guessing, here goes. As far as I could tell, it seemed like Grey had fielded a probe that was loaded with magical telesma and other gadgets, and gotten it close enough to Halley's Comet and siphon off some of its magical energy and somehow transmit it back to earth and, specifically, into Grey. What Grey was hoping to achieve I can't guess, but it didn't go as planned.

- Stone, I agree with you. You *don't* know what you're talking about. While parts of your story are plausible—the theory that Halley's Comet was actually a spirit of significant power saw some serious discussion in academic circles back in '61—others simply don't make sense. Magic relies on earth's biosphere and is limited by it. The background count in space is (no pun intended) astronomical. Like sound, mana cannot travel through a true vacuum. The possibility of a ritual siphoning power from the comet is intriguing, but there's simply no way to transfer that much mana to earth.
- Ethernaut
- I don't mean to call you a liar, Stone, but Saeder-Krupp's probe was called the *Dulcio* and was "accidentally" destroyed by an Ares orbital defense laser on May 26th, 2061 before it got anywhere near the comet.
- Orbital DK
- Unless they fielded a second probe that was even more secret than the *Dulcio*...
- Plan 9

We were spooked, bad, and we got out of Dodge as fast as we could. Our wheelman had connections with the Vory and they smuggled him out to Vladivostok. It was the last I've seen of him. Myself and the last remaining member of the crew I ran with at the time headed west, changing directions and modes of transport multiple times to baffle pursuit. We wound up stashing ourselves in a trailer in the Mojave, swilling cheap beer and trying to figure out our next move. We watched the news for coverage of the bloodbath in Europort. The entire op was blamed on eco-terrorists. There was no mention of my team, or of the thing in the basement.

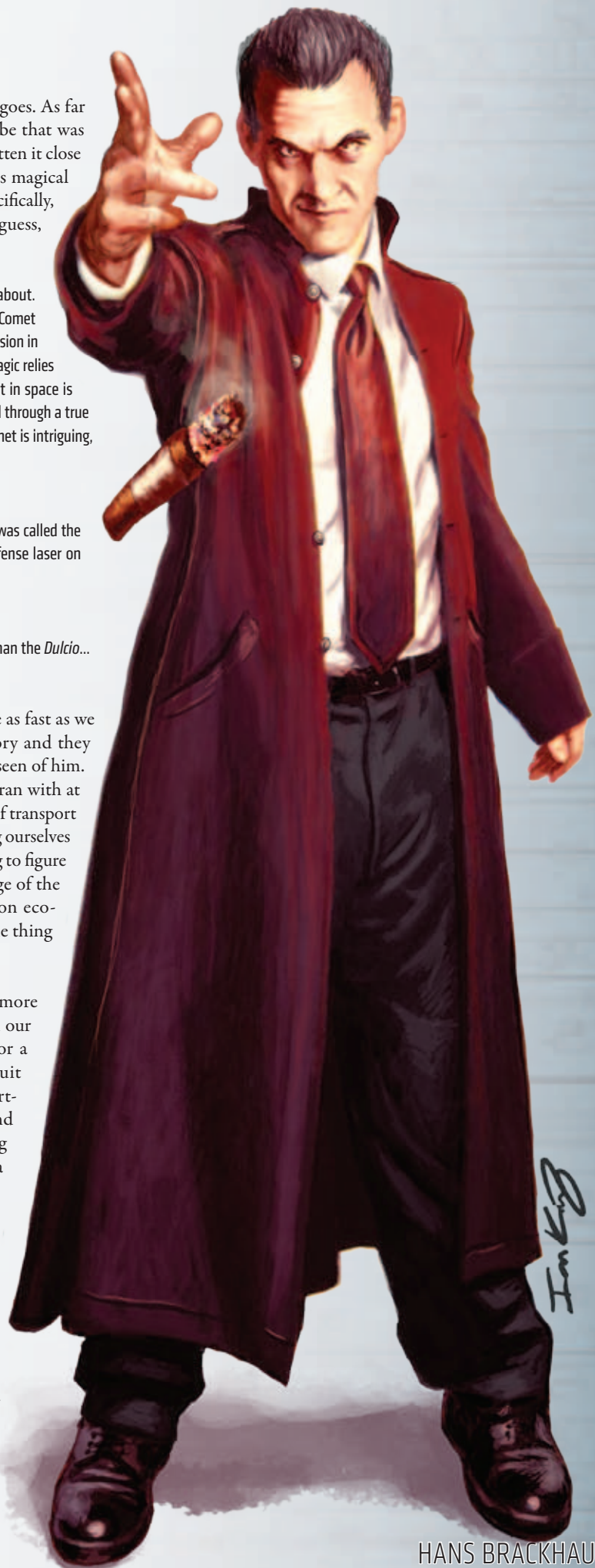
It took Brackhaus less than a month to find us.

Maybe less than that, honestly. Maybe he had more important things on his agenda. He just knocked on our door one day. A handsome ork—easily mistaken for a bland looking human—in a ten-thousand-nuyen suit custom-tailored to fit his frame. He had dark, short-cropped hair, just beginning to grey in places, and his eyes, I remember, were black. He was carrying a briefcase, and sitting in the dust behind him was a helicopter that somehow we hadn't heard land.

He'd no more than introduced himself (in good English, with a very slight German accent) when my partner freaked out and started waving a gun in his face. He seemed to take it in stride.

"It won't do you any good to kill me," Brackhaus said. "I always come back."

I got him to put the gun away. There was no visible backup, but I just had this sinking feeling in my gut that this wasn't a situation that a Colt Manhunter was going to get us out of.



“What do you want?” I asked. I didn’t want to insult him, but I was never big on etiquette, at least not the kind that means pussyfooting around.

“You two,” and at this point he said our names, all of the names the two of us had accumulated over our lives, “are responsible for the death of Lukas Grey. Or rather, I should say, what was left of him.”

A denial was forming on my friends lips, so I spoke before he could, banking on the fact that if Brackhaus wanted us dead, we’d be dead. “That’s right. What of it?” Hopefully, I did a passable job of sounding less scared than I felt. My partner looked at me like I’d sprouted a second head.

“Well firstly, I would like to thank you,” Brackhaus said, reaching down to the handle of the briefcase resting at his side, causing my teammate to flinch.

“I was Grey’s direct superior. What he did was without my knowledge, without my approval, and obviously beyond his capabilities. He got what was coming to him.”

Even back then, I’d been handed lines of bullshit by dozens of suits, and my detector was pretty finely calibrated. Brackhaus was either telling the truth or was a truly fantastic liar. After expressing his gratitude, Brackhaus also asked for our continued discretion in this matter and an appropriate period of grace before we shared our story with anyone. In exchange, he left behind his briefcase, which was filled with certified credsticks.

- Sure it’s wise to be telling us this? You seem to be going against your own advice about fucking with Brackhaus.
- Hard Exit
- If twelve years isn’t a respectful grace period, I don’t know what is. Besides, there are certain things a man just can’t hold inside himself forever.
- Stone

The next time I saw Hans Brackhaus was in Manhattan. This was two years ago. His age was the same, and he had a similar appearance, but this Brackhaus was human, and most importantly, showed no sign whatsoever of recognizing me. I remember that he smoked old-fashioned tobacco and paper cigarettes. Lucky Strikes, specifically. This was with my current crew, although one of our guns was still hospitalized after the last run, and we had brought a local ganger on board to round out the team (last time I ever made that mistake).

A job had gone pear shaped, and Brackhaus wanted to minimize his exposure. He had installed a team to tap the mainframe of a local company, but the runners he had hired fucked up and wound up in a firefight with the on-site security. Some went to ground, others got arrested, and a few got dead. Brackhaus wanted us to bring them back to him at the U-Stor-It where we met him. The run itself was as simple as these things get, but the decision to take it was no walk in the park. Our mage assented Brackhaus—just part of our due diligence—and said that she saw the aura of a western dragon, a *big* fucking western dragon, superimposed over Brackhaus’s body.

A few members of the team had moral compunctions about making another team of runners into a wizwurm’s snack platter. In the end, though, the price tag was too high, and the majority ruled. We rounded up the team members who were still alive, even the one who was in NYPD, Inc. lockup, and brought them

back to Brackhaus. For the most part, they listened to reason, and came willingly. We didn’t exactly play up the “a dragon may be going to eat you” angle in our negotiations. The wannabe runner we had with us, however, fucked up badly when he was frisking their adept. She pulled a holdout and shot Brackhaus through the head at point blank range.

Something weird happened then. Brackhaus died.

No anchored contingency spell, no high-powered, wired-to-the-gills bodyguards, no turning into a dragon, laughing off the peashooter shot and going on a rampage. He just sank to the ground, dead. Afterwards—and I’m afraid if you’re wondering how we resolved the awkward situation this put us in, I’ll have to leave you hanging—our mage concluded he must not have been a dragon after all. Just an “ordinary” initiated hermetic mage using masking to alter his astral signature.

- The truth is, a lot of Saeder-Krupp Johnsons using the Brackhaus name around Hamburg pull these kinds of charades. It makes them feel invulnerable, knowing that runners and other street scum would never try anything against them if they believed this Brackhaus was Lofwyr himself or his personal envoy.
- Red Anya
- Not to sound paranoid or anything, but how do you know that the Brackhaus your mage assented during the initial meet was the same entity there to make the pickup?
- Winterhawk

I did work for a Hans Brackhaus a third time, but I’m afraid that in the interest of professionalism, I can’t tell you about it.

What I can tell you is that Mr. Johnson calling himself Herr Brackhaus can be taken at least three different ways, all easily mistaken for each other. But knowing which applies to what situation can be the difference between life and death. First, Hans Brackhaus is used as a generic term meaning any Johnson representing Saeder-Krupp interests. Just as Mr. Satou is the Renraku-specific version of Mr. Johnson, Saeder-Krupp company men often use Hans Brackhaus as a nom de business. The Hans Brackhaus I saw die in Manhattan was not the first or the last. Secondly, it is widely rumored that Lofwyr himself often poses as a middle-aged male human with steel-grey hair named Hans Brackhaus. The proliferation of this rumor, of course, explains why so many S-K Johnsons use the name Brackhaus. Who in their right mind wants to fuck with Lofwyr?

- All right, so that explains why Joe Wageslave working for S-K Prime would use the Brackhaus name. But why would using the Brackhaus name benefit Lofwyr himself? Wouldn’t it make it easier for him to be tracked, identified, and targeted?
- Pistons
- Perhaps because there are so many other Hans Brackhaus “clones” out there that it allows him to move around completely incognito to keep a hand in his own operations? Or perhaps because it is always advantageous to have your enemies underestimate you.
- Winterhawk

- He has every reason to allow the Brackhaus legend to proliferate. It makes all of his agents out to be as feared and formidable as he is.
- Cosmo
- It reminds me of branding, honestly. If the tag on a suit says Armanté, you expect quality. If a Mr. Johnson calls himself Brackhaus, you expect you're one step away from dealing with a dragon.
- Dr. Spin

Lastly, there is the “real” Hans Brackhaus. A real individual whose movements throughout the past decades have been conveniently obfuscated and camouflaged by all of the other Hans Brackhauses out there. It's this Hans that I want to tell you about, although it's hard to tell where the fact ends and the fabrication begins.

Records indicate that this Hans Brackhaus was born in Bremen in 2003, which would make him 70 years old this year. However, eyewitness accounts seem to indicate that he appears and moves like a man twenty or thirty years younger than that, possibly due to Leonization treatments—or something more sinister.

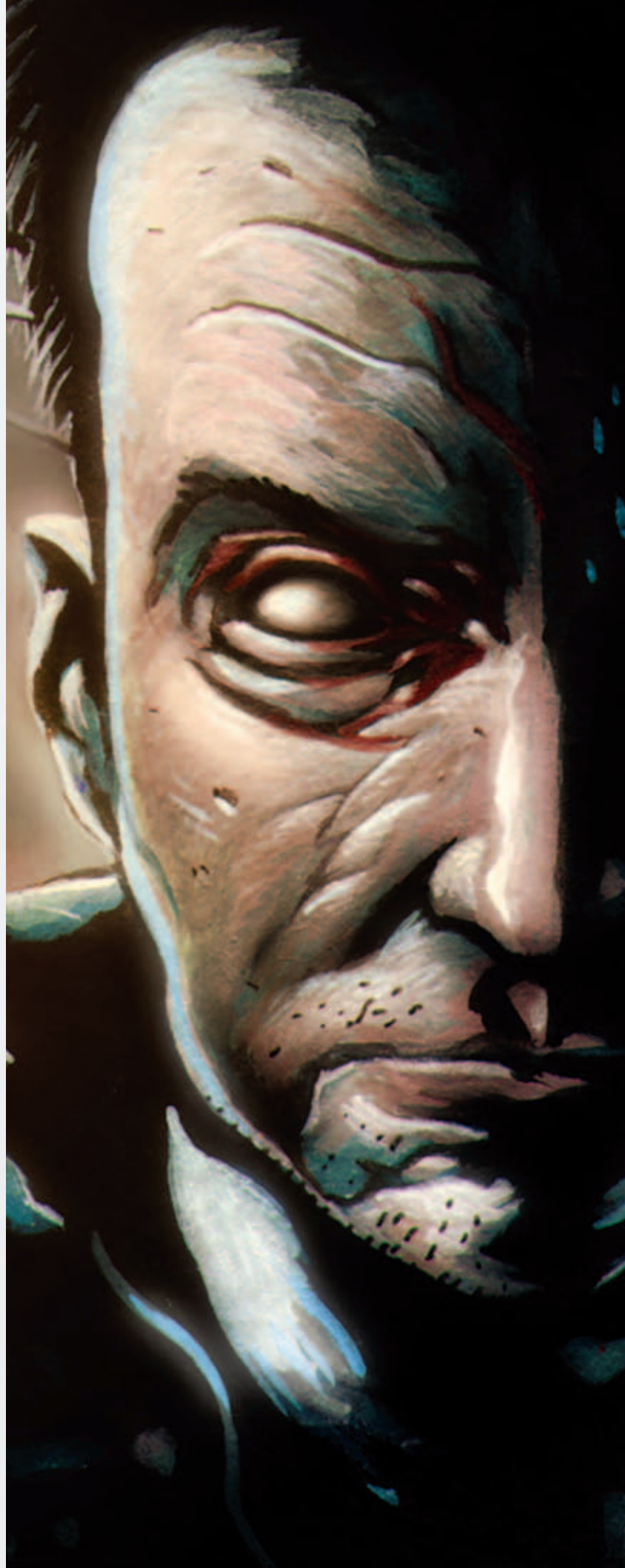
- Like what, exactly? Baby blood infusion?
- Glasswalker

Both of his parents were Thyssen-Krupp employees. Financial records show that there has been a Hans Brackhaus on Thyssen-Krupp's payroll since the '20s. In 2029, in the aftermath of the first Matrix Crash, Brackhaus masterminded the takeover off German Telekom by Ruhr Data Fax. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when he met Lofwyr, but it seems that they must have met, and Brackhaus become his protégé, some time during that decade.

Brackhaus was publicly implicated as being Lofwyr's agent in the death of Michael Beloit by his widow (and Lofwyr's most public enemy), Wilhelmina Graff-Beloit. He was, of course, never officially charged. Financial records indicate that he was also responsible for the shell companies and proxies that were grabbing up BMW stock to facilitate Lofwyr's hostile takeover of the company in 2037. When Graff-Beloit put out a contract on the great dragon (spoiler alert: he survived), it seems that another team of operatives hired by her severely wounded Brackhaus. He did not resurface until the 2050s. Records indicate that his intervening time was spent in a coma, being rebuilt with the best cyberware money could buy, and in recovery/physical rehabilitation. That seems like an awfully long time to be out of action on medical leave, however, so I doubt we're getting the whole story here.

- Of course, there are also those who believe that the real Brackhaus was dead by 2040, and that Lofwyr began using the name in the next ten years.
- Fianchetto

In any case, by the 2050s Brackhaus had reemerged, acting as a middleman between Saeder-Krupp Prime and the global shadow community. Of course, the increasing number of others using the Brackhaus name provided an almost impenetrable smokescreen for his activities. He was most likely responsible for arranging a series of shadow operations to weaken the Swiss Bank Corporation in preparation for S-K's acquisition of it in



the wake of Fuchi's collapse in 2059. Currently, the same Hans Brackhaus is an executive on the payroll of both Ætherlink and Hermes Matrix Services, two of S-K's largest Matrix-based subsidiaries. The man has personally seen the Matrix rise from the ashes of not one but two crashes and evidences a strong interest in Matrix tech and information warfare.

- Brackhaus hired my team to defuse one of the EMP devices in the tunnels under Berlin during Crash 2.0. I remember we all thought the world was ending at the time, but he seemed cool as a cucumber. Our mage said that Brackhaus appeared mundane on the astral, but that his presence gave him a bad feeling. Not sure where that fits into your taxonomy of Brackhauses (Brackhausen?).
- Clockwork

Most recently, Brackhaus has been arranging numerous runs against Horizon subsidiaries the world over, especially Singularity and other Horizon branches involved in Matrix development. Specifically, these operations have enabled Saeder-Krupp to win back public network infrastructure in Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. Brackhaus has also contracted shadowrunners for operations aimed at increasing Saeder-Krupp presence in Caracas, in Amazonia and in Dallas in the CAS.

A continuous interest of Brackhaus throughout all of the years he has been active is recruitment for S-K Prime's proprietary black-ops division. In addition to recruiting from the Urban Brawl and Desert Wars circuits, Brackhaus likes to recruit the best of the best shadowrunners, often making them an offer they can't refuse. You'd do well to remember that whether you like it or not, any run you do for Brackhaus is also an audition.

- One method that he likes to use is to come to blown-to-pieces Desert Wars and Urban Brawl vets while they are on their deathbed or floating in a nutrient tank. He promises to rebuild them using the best deltaware on the market if they will sign a contract to work for S-K Prime black ops. And he's good for his word. Of course, he also likes to have the clinics add in little contingencies, from implanted RFID tags to carcerands to cortex bombs.
- Butch
- And you would know this why?
- Kane
- More than one of these proud new employees has wisely paid me to check over the work that Brackhaus had done on them. Getting a second opinion on potential implants is something that is better done late than never.
- Butch

- Once me and a crew I was working with actually got pinched by Knight Errant and wound up in the clink. Hey, it happens to the best of us, right? A troll—a troll—calling himself Hans Brackhaus came to us in prison. He would get us out, no questions asked, and erase all traces of our criminal record, if we did a job for him. Don't ask me why a guy known as a Saeder-Krupp Johnson has those kinds of contacts in Knight Errant, but he did. What choice did we have? We said yes.

All he told us about the job was the name of a contact that was supposed to meet us when we arrived on site. The next thing I knew we were on a chartered flight to Argentina, and from there we got on this tiny, freezing prop plane that took us God knows where.

"God knows where" turned out to be a S-K research station on the Brunt ice shelf. That's in Antarctica, for those of you not up on your geography. Our contact turned out to be MIA, along with everyone else in the station. The bush pilot who took us there tossed us some cold-weather gear, but he was in a hurry to get gone, something about a storm brewing. Our commlinks were getting no signal reception whatsoever, so we had no choice but to look for a way into the facility, either that or literally freeze our butts off.

The entire facility was deserted. Empty labs, empty bunks, an empty rec room. No blood. No bodies. Dinner was still on the mess-hall tables, cold but not yet rotten. The doors and windows had been barricaded. The mage who'd come with us tried to assense the place to find out what had happened there.

What he found was a message scrawled on the wall in astral pigments. He told me it said: "Don't project." We soon found out why.

It was almost sunset when they started coming. Sometimes they'd make no sound at all, sometimes they'd give off this awful wail. They wore the bodies of the research station's staff, but they weren't them, not really. Their bodies were rigid with frostbite, their skin black and blue, the lab coats and cold suits they wore crusted with ice and snow. Their eyes had no life at all in them, but they glowed all the same. Shedim, the mage said they were called. But I know zombies when I see them, and they were fucking zombies. They came in waves. For every five we killed, ten more would come in the next wave, stronger, faster, and tougher than the last time. We used everything we brought with us and were down to our last few rounds on the weapons we'd found in the research facility. We'd fallen back to the operations sector and were surrounded on all sides.

Then there was a loud bang, almost like an explosion, and I lost consciousness. When I regained it, I was in and out, in waves. We were being med-evac'd out by creepy S-K corporate security who wore matte black mil-spec armor with mirrored riot helmets that hid their faces entirely. When I fully regained consciousness it was in a corporate hospital in Buenos Aires. I managed to make it back to Seattle on my own dime. I never learned what Brackhaus wanted us to find there, or what had happened to that facility. I never heard from Brackhaus again, but true to his word he'd made my criminal record disappear, and I was free.

What the hell happened, though? Your guess is as good as mine.

- Sounder

HANS BRACKHAUS

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
4 (6) 3 (5) 5 (6) 4 5 (6) 6 5 (6) 5 5 2.13 11 (12) 2

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10 (12)/11

Armor (B/I): 8/7

Skills: Con 4, Disguise 6, Dodge (Ranged) 3 (+2), Electronics skill group 3, Etiquette (Corporate) 6 (+2), Forgery 3, Intimidation (Mental) 5 (+2), Leadership 5, Negotiation (Bargaining) 6 (+2), Palming 3, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols (Hold-Outs) 4 (+2), Unarmed Combat (Block) 2 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Corporate Politics 6, Psychology 5, Runner Hideouts 6, Saeder-Krupp 6, SOTA Technology 6, English 5, German N

Qualities: Blandness, Murky Link, Photographic Memory

Augmentations: Bone Density Augmentation (Rating 2), Cerebral Booster (Rating 1, alphaware), Datajack (betaware), Fingertip Compartment (betaware), Genewipe, Masque, Muscle Toner (Rating 2, alphaware), Nanite Hive [Rating 3 w/ Oxyrush (Rating 5), Universal Nanite Hunters (Rating 6) and Universal Nantidotes (Rating 8)], Olfactory Booster (Rating 6, betaware), Orthoskin (Rating 2), Platelet Factories, Skillwires (Rating 5, betaware), Shock Hand (betaware), Synaptic Booster (Rating 1).

Gear: Doc Wagon contract (Platinum, five years), earbuds [Rating 2, w/ audio enhancement (Rating 3), recording unit], fake SIN (Rating 6 w/ concealed carry license (Rating 6)), two doses jazz,

linguasofts (Afrikaans, Cantonese, French, Italian, Japanese, Orz'et, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, Sperethiel, all rating 5), Hermes Ikon Commlink [Response 5, Signal 5, Firewall 5, System 5 w/ biometric reader, skinlink, subvocal microphone, and trodes], monocle [Rating 4, w/ low light, flare compensation, image link, smartlink], Mortimer of London Greatcoat [Chemical Protection (Rating 2), Insulation (Rating 2), and Nonconductivity (Rating 6)], nanopaste disguise, two doses psyche, white noise generator.

Programs: Analyze 4, Browse 4, Command 2, Edit 4, IC Agent [Rating 5, w/ Armor 5, Attack 5, Black Hammer 5, Stealth 5, and Track 5].

Weapons:

Shock Hand [Reach 0, DV 6S(e), AP -half]

Walther Secura Kompakt [Heavy pistol, DV 5P, AP -5, SA, RC 1, 9(c) w/ concealable holster, personalized grip, smartgun, and APDS ammo]

Morissey Elan [Hold-out pistol, DV 6S(e), AP -half, SA, RC 1, 5(c), w/ concealable holster, personalized grip, smartgun, and stick'n'shock ammo]

Walther Palm Pistol [Hold-out pistol, DV 4S + Toxin, AP +2, SS/BF, RC 1, 2(b) w/ ceramic/plasteel components, hidden gun arm slide, personalized grip, smartgun, and warp capsule rounds (Power 10, Speed: Immediate, Penetration: -1, Stun Damage, Disorientation, Hallucinations)]



JONATHAN BLAKE

POSTED BY: FIANCHETTO

VITAL STATS: JONATHAN BLAKE

Age: 52 **Height:** 1.9 m
Weight: 102 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Green **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

Blending in among the many wealthy enclaves of Seattle is a mansion that belongs to a madman. You would not know it by its outward appearance. There is nothing to set it apart from any other mansion in the district save for the initials emblazoned on its iron gates: JB. The owner pays taxes, makes sure each room is cleaned daily, and even keeps the home up to date with the latest trends in interior design. Everything about the mansion is perfect, except for the fact that for forty years the mansion has been constantly cleaned and updated without ever being inhabited.

- I'm no mathematician, but if the house sat there for forty years and the man is only in his early fifties, he must have bought it around the time he hit puberty.
- Baka Dabora
- I ran a background check on him the first time I worked for him. I was shocked at how much of his history was freely available. There was a Jonathan Blake who graduated from Piedmont Elementary in Bellevue and Bellevue Preparatory School after that. So, all the evidence points to him growing up and going to school in Seattle, except there are no pictures of him anywhere in the school records, and not a single person remembers ever knowing a kid by that name.
- Slamm-0!

It is the hallmark of a good spy to maintain elaborately detailed cover identities. It is the hallmark of a madman to orchestrate your real identity as though it were a cover. This is how I came to see Jonathan Blake, a man whose real identity is as carefully maintained and empty as his home in Seattle was for so many decades.

The secret to dealing with Blake is learning to separate truth from fiction. The deception begins with the circumstances of the employment that he undertook for most of his adult life. Jonathan Blake spent most of his adult life working as a special acquisitions executive for Saeder-Krupp until a hot August night in 2057 when the great dragon Dunkelzahn was assassinated. Within hours of the dragon's death, Blake vanished so completely that rumors began to surface that his disappearance and the death of the dragon were somehow related. Speculation

became accusation later that year when Dunkelzahn's will revealed that the dragon had left Blake a sizable chunk of Wuxing stock. No one understood what could have motivated that provision, and most were surprised that there had even been a relationship between the dragon and the corporate fixer. And Blake wasn't talking. He was hiding, thanks to Lowfyr issuing a capture order for Blake and offering a handsome reward for anyone capable of bringing him in. I came close in '59 when I tracked him to a village outside of Burg Eltz in the Eifel Mountains, and again in '60 when he was spotted in Milan.

It was another three years before Blake resurfaced, appearing in the hands of the DIMR. In the fall of 2063, Nadja Daviar took a trip to the Vatican to meet with the pope. When she left Rome, Blake was with her. The pairing of those two drew attention from some powerful groups, who did more looking into just who Blake was. He was quickly outed as one of Dunkelzahn's watchers (individuals placed deep within factions the dragon was concerned about in order to collect information). This was surprising, but an even larger surprise was in store—not long after Blake's capture, Lowfyr rescinded the capture order.

- Blake had a falling out with Nadja Daviar almost immediately after they landed in DeeCee due to Blake's refusal to work for or support any DIMR actions. He has his own ideas of how Dunkelzahn's legacy should be furthered, and it did not mesh well with what the Draco Foundation was doing.
- Frosty
- I had the pleasure of doing business with Blake soon after Lowfyr backed off. He didn't act like a man who was happy to have survived the wrath of a dragon. He acted pissed off that Lowfyr hadn't killed him.
- Black Mamba
- Why did Lowfyr back off anyway? Blake isn't a big enough fish for Daviar to leverage the might of the DF to protect him.
- Aufheben

After being brought into the light, Blake didn't stick his head back in the sand. He collected his inheritance and went to work for Wuxing, doing the same type of work he had once done for S-K. The relationship was short-lived. Wuxing hired Blake under the pretense they could pump him for information about how S-K operated and what they were after. When he refused to share, the company arranged to buy out his stocks for more than market value, and they parted ways amicably.

Blake was flush with cash and free to pursue his own interests. Had it been me, I would have bought a tropical island far enough away from civilization that I wouldn't need to worry about assassination attempts. However, as I said, Jonathan Blake is a madman. He contacted Samantha Villiers and offered his services as an executive. She turned him down without bothering to meet with him. Angry but undaunted, Blake shopped his skills to Nicholas Aurelius of Cross Applied Technologies.

Again his services were not required. Defeated and humiliated, he skulked back into the skin of his natural identity. After forty plus years, Jonathan Blake finally went home.

- Blake was seriously offended by the way Villiers and Aurelius rejected him. He saw himself as a valuable, desired commodity in the corporate world and rudely discovered he was not. It could be that Lowfyr or even Wuxing black-listed the man, but he's never been able to accept such a simple explanation. He took the rejections as a personal attack, and he responded violently.
- Mr. Bonds
- I think I was part of that response. I did a few peculiar jobs for Blake right before the Crash. It was wetwork made to look like accidents, but the targets were random and disconnected. A nurse, a cab driver, a seamstress, and several other innocuous targets whose only connection was having recent contact with Samantha Villiers' inner circle.
- Riser
- Blake is an expert at uncovering spy networks, and the targets you mentioned sound like couriers. I think Blake was trying to dismantle Villiers' spy network as a message to her.
- Hard Exit

The day Jonathan Blake moved to Seattle he held a secret meeting with Mary Luce, Evo's director of North American operations. It isn't clear what was said during that meeting, but the two weren't seen together again until last year when they were spotted having a very public and very intimate coffee date in the middle of downtown Seattle. All of these activities fit his carefully constructed public image of a well-connected billionaire who is still a man of the people.

- Luce ought to think twice about boarding that train. Blake was married five times during his tenure with S-K, and only three wives survived the experience. One committed suicide, and a second was found murdered during an evening jog.
- Sunshine
- Is he any relation to Jerroldine Blake, former director of the CDC?
- Plan 9
- That would be wife number two. She is the only one to keep the name, and the only woman Blake married inside of the North America. There is a lot of speculation that he seduced and married Jerroldine as part of his cover while he ran operations for Lowfyr in the states.
- Sunshine
- There were rumors that Luce was another of Dunkelzahn's Watchers. Her meeting with Blake supports the theory.
- Axis Mundi

Since his return, Blake has dedicated himself to furthering that hometown hero image, building a sculpture of an actual person around his hollow core. He has made sizable donations to the Bellevue Art Museum and even funded the reconstruction of a wing of the Cougar Mountain Hospital after it was damaged in a freak explosion in '71. He's held dinners for local executives,



especially those connected to Bellevue's Ares and Gaetronics operations, prompting speculation that he may be considering a run against Daniel Reynolds for Mayor of Bellevue. Based on my history with Blake, I am certain the mayor's office is not his endgame. His megalomania will force him to pursue an office high enough to erase the bowling ball-sized chip on his shoulder. His future plans could include the governor's office, a senate seat, and maybe even a future presidential run.

- How would he pull that off, given what you say about his identity? Political candidates' background gets pretty exhaustively searched, so wouldn't he be exposed?
- Picador
- I'm sure he won't actually run until he's built an unimpeachable fake trail. Since that sort of detailed and delicate work takes time, I expect he has several teams of runners already on the job. I expect you'll find people in the next few years from the Piedmont Elementary and the Bellevue Preparatory School who will suddenly remember Jonathan Blake as a fellow student, and they will have nothing but glowing remarks and warm anecdotes to tell about Blake that will work perfectly for campaign commercials.
- Kay St. Irregular

In preparation for his political future, Blake added CEO to his list of accomplishments. He purchased Seattle-based Centurion Security in the Cross Applied Technologies sell-off. He expanded the company's operations to include counterintelligence as well as air and sea transport and defense services, essentially turning the security firm into a mercenary contractor.

- He also bought the services of several Seraphim no longer interested in protecting the Aurelius line. He always keeps two of them nearby serving as his personal guard. It is anyone's guess what happened to the rest.
- Mihoshi Oni
- Blake is building a broad contact base in Seattle, furthering rumors of his intent to seize political power. He has cultivated a friendship with Vice Admiral John Lienhard, commander of the USS Colin Powell stationed in the Everett Shipyards. The relationship is notable because it puts Blake in the crosshairs of the Joint Task Force Seattle commander, Brigadier General John E. Darcy, who is none too happy with the outspoken vice admiral.
- Sounder

As an individual, Jonathan Blake is not someone I want to know. He is fiercely guarded and protective of his image both physical and print. He prides himself on the fact that he speaks seven languages and exercises for two hours each day. I can't speak to his skills as an executive, but as a Johnson and a fixer he is as good, and as dangerous, as they come. He's hired me for work several times, despite the fact I nearly caught him twice while he was hiding from Lowfyr, and perhaps because of it. He respects talent.

- Blake is a weapon without a wielder. He has always operated in the service of a higher power, but without that leadership to rein him in, he's gone a bit mad. He wants to gain both corporate and political power and is slowly amassing a fortune to do both, largely through runs designed to create favorable market conditions. While unclear, his specific goals are certainly tied to his megalomania. He is a vindictive man and a power grabber who thinks incredibly highly of himself on the surface and needs others to think as highly of him as he does himself. He'll often meet with runners face-to-face to make sure they know who they're working for.
- Hard Exit
- Sounds like a very bad strategy for one seeking political office.
- Baka Dabora
- I'm not so sure it is. If you know you're working for Blake, then you must know what he is capable of. He spends a lot of time developing his public image, and it is obvious that he knows how to remove any threat to that image. The real danger is if he is accidentally spotted with known shadow-runners, but then you have to remember that this is the man who stayed hidden from Lowfyr for six years. Blake makes excellent use of his Seraphim and his spy past to ensure that all of his meetings are secure. You aren't going to catch the man on camera unless he wants to be caught.
- Kay St. Irregular
- If you look at the other known Watchers, each of them has that something special, be it morality or ability. What does Blake have that encouraged a dragon to pick him to serve as a spy?
- Mika
- Position. The work Blake did at SK-Prime was less about acquisitions than it was controlling Lowfyr's considerable network of spies within rival organizations. In a sense, he watched the watchers. Blake was coordinating his own team of spies for Lowfyr while he was spying for Dunkelzahn.
-
- That's an incredibly dangerous undertaking, of course, but the fact that Blake was involved in it and survived is more than just a testament to his considerable chutzpah. Blake is a man who dealt with dragons and survived, and you better believe that the other dragons are aware of that. As the dragons start to choose sides in the ongoing tensions, some of them will want Blake on their side, and others will want him out of the way. I'm sure he's already working on the deals and maneuvers that will keep him among the living.
- Frosty
- What Jonathan Blake has done has hidden himself among a sea of madmen and crazy women. The wealthy? They're some of the craziest people with the most fragged up drek you'll ever find. Behind closed doors, you'll find BTL habits. Tempo addictions. Illicit affairs. Very unusual fetishes. The only difference between us and them: they have the money to cover up their imperfections. If you ask me, Blake's the proverbial needle in the haystack when it comes to hiding amongst the wealthy and the insane. Oh wait, that's not very PC, is it: it should be the privileged and the "eccentric."
- Aufheben

JONATHAN BLAKE

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
5	5	5 (7)	5	6	6	5	4	6	6	6.0	11 (13)	1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/10

Armor (B/I): 10/3

Skills: Athletics skill group 4, Automatics (Submachine Guns) 5 (+2), Data Search 4, Disguise (Cosmetic) 6 (+2), Etiquette (Business) 4 (+2), Infiltration (Urban) 6 (+2), Pistols (Semi-Automatics) 5 (+2), Influence skill group 6, Intimidation 6, Leadership 4, Navigation 4, Palming (Pickpocket) 5 (+2), Perception 6 (9), Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pilot Aircraft 3, Shadowing (Tail Evasion) 6 (+2), Unarmed Combat (Martial Arts) 5 (+2)

Knowledge skills: Bully Tactics 3, Corporate history (S-K) 4, Corporate History (Wuxing) 4, Covert Surveillance Techniques 5, Data Havens 4, Fixers 5, Matrix Security Procedures 5, Media 6, Public Relations 6, Public Speaking 6, English N, French 4, German 6, Italian 4, Japanese 4, Mandarin 4, Spanish 3,

Qualities: Adept, Natural Athlete, Guts, Local Fame

Adept Powers: Attribute Boost (Charisma) 2, Enhanced Perception 3, Improved Reflexes 2, Kinesics 3, Mystic Armor 1, Natural Immunity 1

Gear: 200 rounds APDS (100 Semi-Automatic, 100 SMG), area jammer 8, commlink (custom, Response 6, Signal 5, Firewall 7, System 5), FFBA half-body suit, glasses [Rating 3, w/ image link, smartlink, thermographic], Zoé Executive Suite Line (short jacket, shirt, trousers), respirator (Rating 3)

Programs: Analyze 3, Encrypt 4

Weapons:

Ares Predator IV [Heavy pistol, DV 5P, AP -1 or -5, SA, RC —, 15 (c)]

HK MP-5TX [Submachine gun, DV 50, AP — or -4, SA/BF/FA, RC 2 (3), 20 (c), w/ smartgun system]

POSTED BY: BAKA DABORA

VITAL STATS: KIA

Age: 27 **Height:** 1.74 m
Weight: 69 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Brown **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

Kia is that rarest of creatures—the idealistic runner. He believe in things like right and wrong, and when he talks about the proper way to do things, what’s “right” is not always tied to the thing that makes you the most money.

This doesn’t mean he’s some sort of wide-eyed naïf that it would be easy for the more cynical to take advantage of. He knows the tricks of the trade and the nasty ways of the world, and he’s fully aware of some of the things you have to do to get a job done. He’s got a mind devious enough to think of a half-dozen sneaky, underhanded tricks for each stage of a mission, but he uses that knowledge to plan for what others might do to him, rather than employing all of these tricks himself against innocent marks. This anticipation of problems and double-crosses has led Kia to become very savvy about his meets; most of his meets take place via commlink call, in AR, or in Virtual Private Networks. When he absolutely has to meet in person, you can bet he has sufficient magical and physical support so that he cannot be easily manipulated into entering a bad deal.

This also doesn’t mean that he’s some sort of law-abiding boy scout. Kia’s got a rap sheet as long as many of us (I make an exception for over-achievers such as Kane). To him, “right” and “wrong” are not close parallels to “legal” and “illegal.” That’s why he’s not a sarariman any more. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

- It’s not as big a deal as Baka Dabora makes it seem. What it comes down to is that Kia thinks about the full consequences of his actions—how they will spin out in the long term, and how they will affect people other than himself. In many ways, that’s just being practical. If you take someone out, it’s best if you know who’s going to be upset about that and what they might do to seek revenge before you actually pull the trigger.
- Picador
- Kia needs to be careful. If he still possesses his wardrobe from his previous life, or any other material belongings from a previous life, there is a chance, no matter how slim, of someone associated with the European Tiger Corporation recognizing him. If I were Kia, I would ditch everything that could be associated with his old life and come up with a new style for himself.
- Jimmy No

Kia’s wardrobe looks like it belongs to a promising East Asia executive, and that’s what he once was. Born in Pusan, he, like many other corp brats in the city, was raised on the gospel of the Eastern Tiger Corporation. Eastern Tiger will lead Korea to national prominence. Eastern Tiger will dominate the Pacific Prosperity Group. Eastern Tiger will become the envy of the East, and of the whole world, and it will bring all the benefits it reaps home to Korea, benefiting the entire nation, employee and non-employee alike. Et cetera, et cetera.


As a teen, Kia also saw the other side of the ETC sales job. Fast cars, power, your choice of men and/or women to sleep with, and so on. You cannot live in Pusan without noticing the impact of a high-ranking ETC official entering a restaurant or a bar, and you’re not human if some little piece of you doesn’t notice it and cry out “I want that.”

- Officially, of course, I don’t want that. Unofficially, on the other hand ...
- Aufheben

Kia had a good head on his shoulders, and he was also good with people. He was just rebellious enough to seem like a rebel or a non-conformist without doing anything that would cause upper management any serious degree of concern. He got into university on ETC’s sponsorship, skipped a year or two, got out, and got into the job that was waiting for it. Everything was proceeding according to plan as he moved toward the life that had been designed for him.

Until he decided he didn’t want it.

There wasn’t just one incident that led to his departure from ETC, but one story illustrates the problems he was having. Eastern Tiger was getting into the austras koks business. This is a rare plant whose full properties are still being investigated, but one thing that is clear is its ability to leech metals from the ground and incorporate them into itself. The end result is quite useful in the creation of telesma. ETC had some land in a rural area not far from Pusan, and they decided to experiment in growing austras koks in that area without fully investigating the possible effects of that growth. They grew as many as they could, and after a year or two some seeds blew off, as they tend to do, and took root in nearby woods. These woods were a chief source of industry for a small village, and ETC management was not aware (or remained purposefully ignorant) of the arrival of the new trees. With the metal they bring into their system, austras koks wreak mighty havoc on tree-cutting gear, and the villagers lost some precious equipment in their forests before they figured out what was going on. A major corporation like ETC could absorb the loss of such gear without much difficulty, but the smaller industry of this village could not handle the loss. The business went under, and the forest was snatched up by ETC, who re-hired all the villagers—paying them less than half of what they had been making before. ETC, of course, considered this nothing but a pure win, but Kia believed the company was being far too reckless with their choices.



The core of Kia's ethical system is the idea of co-existence—he thinks individuals need to be careful about the decisions they make and how they affect those around them. That doesn't mean negative effects on others should be avoided. In Kia's beliefs, there are some people who have primarily negative effects on others, which means that harming them might bring a net good to the world. It's a complicated combination of karma and communitarianism, and it's quite possible that Kia himself hasn't worked out all the details of his beliefs. Fully formed or not, though, these beliefs are at the center of what Kia does. And their existence is one of the reasons he became such a good fixer.

- Kia doesn't treat the runners he works with as family—he's not that mean. And he doesn't treat them as neighbors—he's not that careless. He treats them like the kind of person that you'd ask you help you move your junk from one residence to another. He's reliable, straightforward, and knows how to get a job done. If that's what communitarianism is, then it's okay by me.
- Lyran

The first job Kia fixed was also his first shadowrun altogether—it was his own extraction from ETC. It took a while for him to arrange it, because his time in business school and middle management didn't leave him with a wide range of runner contacts. He had one friend from his youth who had gotten into the shadows using the name Jjang, and he figured that was a start. He reached out to his friend, then slowly met Jjang's other contacts in the shadows. He was very careful in who he picked, because he had a specific end in mind. He wanted his old ID dead, rubbed out in a way that would keep anyone from looking for him. He needed people that could fake the

appropriate evidence, people who were also strong enough to get past ETC security and plant the evidence in the right place. The time and care he put into the mission was worth it—when it was done, a body was lying on the floor of his office. It was conclusively identified as being the person Kia used to be, and he was declared dead. That meant Kia was free to adopt a new name and move on to his new life.

- So how does his co-existence philosophy square with him leaving the body of some other guy on the floor of his office to pass for him?
- Nephrine
- One thing I learned in my early inquiries was how to get a hold of bodies of people who were better off dead. Gang fights can have unexpected benefits.
- Kia

After his extraction, Kia entered the shadows with a vengeance. Realizing that beggars can't be choosers, he took just about any job that he could (excepting wetwork). He learned the important lesson that the amount of violence he was willing to commit was not nearly as important as the amount of violence people *believed* he was willing to commit, so he became quite good at assuming a loose-wire persona when the situation called for it. His accuracy at shooting helped with this—nothing puts someone on edge like shooting a button off one of their articles of clothing. Like any beginning runner, he was forced to take on some jobs that didn't exactly fit into his system of beliefs, but he didn't compromise his values overmuch.

One run in particular shows some of the methods that he still uses today. He was part of a team keeping an eye on a Wuxing executive suspected to be selling industrial secrets to one of the Japanacorps. The team wasn't one he had assembled himself, and it wasn't up to his standards of quality. Watching the executive from a high-rise across the street from the exec's offices, one of Kia's teammates, a hacker named Petula, was made by the target. The exec dispatched a security team to the surveillance nest immediately. Petula wanted to get out of there, which was a reasonable solution, but Kia saw opportunity. Bringing more security to where he was, he reasoned, meant there would be less across the street. So he and Petula went to the roof, used a grappling hook to get to the building across the street, then with the help of some ad hoc hacking, made it in to see the exec.

Once he was in there, Kia put on a show. He was full of tics and twitches, looking unsteady and unreliable, until he took a shot. With one, he split a martini glass at the stem. With another, he put a hole in the face of Alice on the spine of a print copy of *Alice in Wonderland* the exec had on his bookshelf. With a third, he took off one of the exec's French cuff links. By that point, the exec was completely off balance and putty in Kia's hands. Kia got him to agree to confess—but only after convincing him that he should bargain with his superiors first to make sure the exec's family didn't suffer for his crimes. The mission was successful, the chance of fatal fallout resulting from it was reduced, and it was accomplished with some nice gunplay.

- The fatal fallout may have been reduced, but it was not eliminated. The exec killed himself shortly after Kia departed.
- Jimmy No

- The important thing to remember here, though was that the exec was going to be dead no matter what, as long as Kia did his job right. Once the evidence against him was found, he was done for. Kia kept the shame from the executive from falling on his family, though, which is a big blessing indeed. It's rare to find someone in the shadows who is that conscious of the welfare of people they don't know.
- Frosty

- It's rare because it's stupid. Look, I'm not saying we should be going on huge sprees of violence and death, but our job is to do the job as efficiently as possible, not to do it in a way that helps out people we've never met. You start introducing complications like that into a run, and you're making yourself weaker. You're also making it too easy to be exploited by someone who knows how you think.
- Riser

These days, sadly, Kia doesn't have as many opportunities to show off his creative shotmaking. With the wealth of contacts he built up and his skill with people, Kia was a natural for fixing, and he's prospered in the role. His notions of right and wrong do not seem to hinder him much, though his occasional streak of intolerance for people who do not share his standards sometimes pushes him to keep skilled people off his team. He treats his runners straight, and he expects them to return the favor. If they don't, they may fall onto his list of people who do too much harm to live. He won't go out of his way to take them out himself, of course, but they won't get any work from him. And they better not get within range of his guns—even if they're a ricochet or two away from being in a direct line of fire—or he may just decide to improve the world with a quick, fancy shot.

- Is Baka Dabora laying it on so thick about the trick shots because he doesn't carry a gun that much? I mean, in the age of magic and cyber, is what Kia does really so impressive?
- Marcos
- Yes, it is. The trick of his technique is not just that he's accurate. He's theatrical. An effective trick shot does not work just because it's accurate—it works because it's timed to catch the target by surprise, and it's aimed at a place that will be certain to get their attention. Kia watches his target's carefully, knowing how they move and what they are looking at, so that when he fires, they react the way he wants them to.
- Riser

Kia has recently been playing a prominent role in the entertainment industry in Southeast Asia. His flair for the dramatic is shared by many agents and producers, who do a lot of his promotion for him by passing along the stories about his prowess as a runner, focusing especially on his facility with a gun.

- Disclaimer: Nothing I'm about to say should be taken as a knock on Kia, or a criticism of his abilities. But he's perfectly positioned to impress people who value flash over substance. Trick shots are great, accurate shots are even better, but they're not the be-all, end-all of running, and they've got very little to do with what it takes to be a good fixer. But in an industry where people decide on the next big musical thing based on the creativity and ingenuity of her hairdo, picking a fixer because he can shoot the wings off of a bee is not that unusual. It doesn't make sense, but it's the way it is.
- Kat o' Nine Tales

A lot of runs in the entertainment industry are espionage-type runs—seeing what other studios are up to, gathering information on works in progress, finding intel about who is about to sign what contract, that sort of thing. But there's a nastier side to the business, and Kia is quickly becoming the go-to guy for that. It goes beyond extractions—he's got a pretty good army of faces, hackers, and social adepts who can wage some vicious propaganda wars, up to and including outright character assassination.

- Despite what Kat said above, Kia's trick shot skills have some relevance in this area. Sometimes in a propaganda war you want a barrage of negative information, but sometimes that can become numbing and the overall effect you're looking for can be lost. A good team can plant one devastating piece of information and then pull back and watch it take effect. Kia knows how to recruit people who can fire those deadly PR shots.
- Dr. Spin

KIA

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	7 (11)	5 (7)	3	6	6	4	5	8	3.0075	11	1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11

Armor (B/I): 11/5

Skills: Con (Fast Talk) 5 (+2), Dodge 4, Etiquette (Corporate) 4 (+2), Intimidation (Physical) 3 (+2), Leadership 5, Longarms 4, Negotiation 6, Perception 5, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pilot Watercraft 2, Pistols (Heavy Pistols) 7 (+2), Running 2, Shadowing 2, Unarmed Combat 2

Knowledge Skills: Business Practices 3, Criminal Psychology 3, Eastern Tiger Corporate Structure 4, Firearms Manufacturers 4, Handgun Manufacturers 3, Japancorps 3, Nippon Professional League Baseball 2, Runner Networks 4, Japanese 4, Korean N, Mandarin 4, Spanish 2

Qualities: Aptitude (Pistols), Exceptional Attribute (Agility), Lucky, SINner

Augmentations: (all betaware) Cyberears [Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement, balance augments, damper, sound link], cybereyes [Rating 4, w/ flare compensation, low-light vision, muscle toner 4, smartlink, thermographic vision, vision enhancement 3, vision magnification], orthoskin 3, wired reflexes 2

Gear: 100 rounds APDS ammo (50 Heavy Pistol, 50 shotgun), area jammer 6, commlink (Fairlight Caliban w/ Iris Orb, Response 4, Signal 4, Firewall 3, System 3), 100 rounds EX-ex ammo (Heavy Pistol), 3 x fake licenses for weapons (Rating 5), 2 x fake SINs (Rating 4), form-fitting body armor (full-suit) 20 rounds gel ammo (Shotgun), Mortimer of London Berwick Line (suit jacket, trousers, shirt), nanopaste disguise (large container), 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (Heavy Pistol)

Weapons:

Ares Predator IV [Heavy Pistol, 5P, AP -1 or -5, SA, —, 15 (c), w/ APDS ammo, EX-ex ammo, personalized grip, smartlink, stick-n-shock ammo]

Franchi SPAS-22 [Shotgun, DV 7P, AP -1 or -5, SA/BF, (1), 10(m), w/ APDS ammo, gel rounds, personalized grip, smartlink]

TESS VAN HAMA

POSTED BY: RIGGER X

VITAL STATS: TESS VAN HAMA

Age: 33 **Height:** 1.67 m
Weight: 50 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Grey **Gender:** Female
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** No

Tess van Hama grew up in the shadows. She's one of the best fixers in the biz because the shadows are in her blood. A lot of us have spent a long time here, but we all came from other worlds. Maybe we got sick of the corporate grind. Maybe we picked up some money shaking down some squatters. Maybe we got sick of kicking a percentage to the oyabun and went into business for ourselves. Tess van Hama, though, was literally born on a shadowrun and never truly stepped back into the light. She was born on the run, and she grew up on the streets.

Tess has strong connections to powerful people, which initially came from the fact that her mother was the mistress of a high-ranking Mitsuhama executive. Such a position brings a luxurious lifestyle. Her mother lived in a penthouse suite, was driven everywhere, and spent her days shopping for sexy little things to wear whenever the executive popped over. When she became pregnant, the affair ended. The executive made sure that Tess and her mother were financially stable, and he stayed away. He tried to be discreet, but as it turned out he was not discreet enough. Tess' mother's name got whispered down into the shadows and soon enough, a crew of runners came looking for her.

- Tess van Hama? English Dutch Japanese heritage?
- Slamm-0!

- It's obviously a fake street name. Does your mother call you Slamm-0!?
- Hannibelle

- Your mom does.
- Slamm-0!

- Names are important, especially when given to oneself. Tess is a diminutive form of Theresa or Esther; van is Dutch, meaning "of" or "from"; and Hama is Japanese for "shore" or "beach." The fact that her surname is half of Mitsuhama could be a symbolic reference to her half-blooded heritage.
- Man-of-Many-Names

Her mother went into labor during the extraction. Tess somehow made it into this world and escaped out of danger with her mother, and the both of them became fugitives. Mother and daughter spent the first year of Tess' life on the run.

Shadowrunners sought them out to collect a bounty, Mitsuhama recovery teams came after them and chased them from country to country, and enemies of Tess' father took an interest as well. Tess' mother finally sought the help of some company men, who brought proof of their loyalty to Tess' father. They got new SINs and were sent away, never to see him again.

Tess remained a juicy target throughout her childhood. Nobody knows how many times she was the target of extractions, assassinations, or other operations. Whether it was two or two dozen, she survived and came out the other side. Whether it was luck or skill doesn't matter. Her mother wasn't so lucky—she was killed during one of the kidnapping attempts. Tess got fed up with bouncing around from safehouse to safehouse and made a break for it. She ended up on the streets, and she found a way to thrive there.

- Her mother's name was Esther.
- Kia

- Kia, how long have you known Tess?
- Bull

- Longer than she led me to believe ...
- Kia

Building on her previous experience as the target of shadowruns, Tess soon found herself planning them. She was a sharp young thing and impressed a few crews with her quick thinking. Soon enough, Johnsons were calling her to find out which crews were the best. Her career as a fixer was born, along with the name of Tess van Hama. She put up with snickers when runners would show up and meet a fixer barely able to get into the club. But time and time again, she matched the best runners with the right jobs. The jokes subsided. Contempt became respect.

This was all part of a plan. Tess knew if she worked long enough and hard enough, the pieces would fall together. The strands would lead her not just to her mother's killers, but to the men who were responsible. She planned to allow herself the luxury of revenge when it was feasible. Her plan is not yet complete—the runners who killed her mother are not all dead. Whether or not she moves on in getting revenge against those runners involved in her kidnappings over the years remains to be seen. If you want a measure of Tess' ferocity, though, just mention the names of the runners she's already gotten to the next time you're in a good runner pub. CarbonClaw. Josette. Kobura. You'll hear some terrible tales of their falls from bleeding-edge shadowrunners to bleeding out in the gutter.

Tess was driven to meet her father, but her fall into the shadows kept them apart. It seemed like he wanted nothing to do with her. He felt for her mother but distanced himself from his child. She was a symbol of something his enemies could use

against him to topple him from control of Mitsuhama. Tess didn't get a face-to-face with him until she set up a daring raid on his penthouse in Kyoto. Everyone she knew thought that only one of them could leave that meeting alive; Tess or her father, but not both. Somehow, they both walked away—not only that, but by the end of the meeting she was in his employ.

- So who is her daddy, Tiger or Toshiro?
- Sounder
- It's hard to tell. I would estimate she's in her early to mid 30s, which would make either Mitsuhama a possible candidate. If she's Tiger's daughter, she was born shortly before his first marriage broke up. If she was born to Toshiro, he was unhappily married shortly after.
- Kia
- I'd put my money on Tiger.
- Bull

Tess's unique position makes her an excellent choice for her father's fixing needs. She can never be heir to the Mitsuhama fortune as an illegitimate child, and she can never rise to a rank of prestige in the Yakuza because she is a woman. Yet both organizations must offer her the proper respect. They have dealt with Mitsuhama for too many years to show disrespect to anyone related to him. Tess usually gets the call when her father has a disagreement with someone, or when he wants a personal assurance that something is completed to the best of his satisfaction.

Tess primarily represents MCT interests. If you get a call from her, it means you've come to the company's attention. Whether or not you answer the call probably depends on the last few runs your team has pulled. Tess is professional enough to contact teams that have run against MCT, since she knows it's all part of the business, and that good help is hard to find. Mitsuhama has plenty of other personnel it uses to draw out those it feels has wronged the company, so she doesn't have to worry about it. If you are meeting with Tess, you may be a deniable asset, but you are considered a valuable one. Valued assets get the most information ahead of time—Tess has been known to pull a little extra data for teams she trusts.

Runners working for Tess often find themselves hitting Shiawase projects and installations. Tess enjoys setting these jobs up because of the corporation's ultra-conservative reputation. Only she knows if they had anything to do with the run that killed her mother. She may also set up runs against Shiawase to keep their attention focused on her, because by this point they assume that a significant number of runs against them are set up by Tess. Even if they're not, the anti-Shiawase runs serve to add to her rep—as well as to Shiawase's file for her. She is happy to take the heat. Her runs against Shiawase may be business, but she runs them with the brutal efficiency of someone taking it personally.

Though most runs she fixes these days have some connection to Mitsuhama, Tess also deals with many Yakuza gumi throughout the world. Her connections to the corporations usually leave her above the squabbles that break out between the factions and families. She is respectful of Yakuza traditions, though she is not a member herself. She would never presume



to participate in Yakuza rites, though quite a few members are surprised with her knowledge of the ceremonies and markings.

The one exception to the respect the Yakuza families hold for Tess resides in Neo-Tokyo. The previous oyabun was vocal in his distaste for Tess and her non-traditional upbringing. She has not been linked to the oyabun's death, but the kumicho running the family, "Uncle" Hiro Kuromota, suspects she had something to do with it. Kuromota will remain in charge of the family until the old oyabun's son comes of age in a few years. Until then, Tess would be wise to not show her face in Neo-Tokyo, nor have anything to do with the family operations. In the rare moments where Tess has traveled through the city by necessity things have been exceedingly tense between her and Uncle Hiro.

- This brings me right back to the name issue, because "Van" is a very interesting choice. The rough Japanese equivalent is "no". Plus, seeing as how there is no letter or symbol for the "v" sound in Japanese, traditional speakers will have difficulty saying her name.
- Mihoshi Oni
- The more I think about this name, the more fascinating it becomes.
- Man-of-Many-Names
- It's an interesting gamble. If Tess is lying about who she is, she runs the risk of Tiger tossing a team her way for a lesson in manners. If the name is the truth, she's got his backing, but also his enemies.
- Bull

Rumors link Tess to Gregor Pendzich, an executive for Trans-Latvian Enterprises. At first, it was believed her connection heralded a move by MCT against NeoNET. That may still happen, but if it does, Tess complicated it by becoming romantically involved with Gregor. The shadows don't do gossip nearly as well as the screamsheets, but it seems like the right fit for Tess. Gregor is older, has a reputation as a no-nonsense businessman, and his company is rumored to be a front for organized crime. When push comes to shove, it will be interesting to see how she handles the conflicting interests.

Claudia Romanov is another name being connected to Tess in a less-than-friendly way. Tess was connected to a few runs against the media maven shortly after her announcement of her child with Johnny Spinrad. These runs didn't fit her usual motif, but she pulled them off well, and Saeder-Krupp ended up with some egg on their face. S-K has not hit back, but Claudia has been bringing undue attention to Gregor's activities to anyone who will listen. Nobody wants to mess with Claudia Romanov in a whisper campaign. Some people wonder if Johnny Spinrad is the one behind Tess sending runners at S-K interests. If this is true, Johnny bounced back from his heartbreak in record time.

Many of Tess' runs are based out of Nagoya, Japan. Nagoya is a city located near the center of the island of Honshu. It has a long history of being an industrial town. Most of the Japanacorp have interests in Nagoya, which motivates them to keep things quiet in town. That makes it an excellent staging point for meets. It also lets runners assemble and plan in relative silence. The port does as much business with smugglers and T-birds as it does with legitimate shipping. She likes to meet with runners somewhere in the bullet train stations. If she needs

someplace with more privacy, she will set up a meeting using the '05 World's Fair grounds.

Between her run-ins with Shiawase and her less-than-ideal relationship with the head of the Neo-Tokyo Yakuza, Tess spends less time in Japan for her own safety. She uses San Francisco as a base when looking for talent in North America. She meets with potential teams on Fisherman's Wharf amid the bright and shiny excesses of the segments run by each of the Japanacorp sponsors. A favorite meeting place is the ferry to Mitsuhamama Presents The Alcatraz Experience. The ride takes about fifteen minutes, which fits her short professional style. If the runners aren't interested, she pays for their trip and sends them on their way. If they want the job, she rides the ferry back with them and talks specifics.

Quiet, public places are hard to come by in a world full of AR and headspam, but they do exist. Tess prefers meeting out in the open rather than in noisy clubs or bars. It may be a holdover from her days as a youth when she had difficulty getting into clubs. But there is also something to be said for meeting in a park or by a fountain. She usually has backup nearby from one of her allies. The visibility of this security depends on how many runners she is meeting. If the runners send one person, she will meet them alone. Otherwise, for every runner at the meet, Tess brings at least one visible bodyguard.

The first time I ran for Tess, we met in a park in Nagoya. She spoke quickly and clearly, and she didn't waste time trying to get us to like her or remind us we were shadowrunning scum. She was the first fixer I ever met who admitted to being unable to answer a question our team had about the run. Most fixers shrug, or offer more money, or promise to get the info from the Johnson later. It was refreshing. In talking to others who worked with her, I've learned that she has shut out runners who ask for too much money, or who make too many comments about how Johnsons are always out to screw the team. There's at least one great hacker in Nagoya who will never get a call from her because she got caught with a little extra paydata. Tess had people bust into that hacker's place and retrieve the skimmed data, and then they trashed her commlinks, clothes, and even melted her Go-Ninja Bunny Team collection.

Despite her background, Tess will run against her father's company. She's sent me into MCT assets, though she looked uncomfortable doing so. She's given us bonuses for no collateral damage, to the point where it's become a standard clause in the runs against MCT that she sends our way. That includes corporate guards and employees, too. She understands there are necessary dangers, but she also appreciates a team that can minimize unnecessary injury and risk.

Tess is a woman of average height and weight with black hair and diluted Asian features. Her fashion style mixes professional, fashionable, and street elements. She has a few cybernetic enhancements but does her best to hide them. She wears her hair long enough to cover her behind-the-ear datajack. She prefers to be indistinguishable during a meet. She prefers blacks and other dark colors, right down to her dark lipstick. Most of her equipment is MCT, but she will use whatever she feels most comfortable with. She usually offers additional tech or weapons in lieu of extra payment.

Tess is everything a runner wants in their fixer. She has excellent connections with both the corporations and criminal

syndicates. She has favors backing her and any teams that run for her. She runs out of multiple cities and rewards good teams with extra bennies. If you want to be treated like a professional, treat her like one.

Just be careful about your connection with her if she ever falls off any of the tightropes she is walking.

- The question, as always, is about how long both sides can continue to get something from each other. Tess is the one who could most likely stay in her position for a prolonged period, so the real focus has to be Tiger (assuming Bull's right and he is the father). Tess is good at her job and managing a lot of successful runs, but if she gets too much status, Tiger—and, more importantly, other MCT executives—will notice, and they'll find a way to reel her back in. How they do that, and how she reacts, will be something to see.
- Baka Dabora

TESS VAN HAMA

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	3	3	3	6	5	4	5	6	4.12	8	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 8/6 or 5/3

Skills: Automatics 4, Blades 4, Climbing 3, Clubs 4, Computers 3, Con 4, Cybertechnology 4, Disguise 4, Dodge 5, Etiquette 4, Escape Artist 4, First Aid 4, Forgery 3, Gymnastics 5, Infiltration 4, Intimidation 5, Leadership 4, Locksmith 3, Longarms 4, Medicine 4, Negotiation 6, Palming 4, Parachuting 3, Perception 4, Pistols 4, Shadowing 4, Throwing Weapons 2, Unarmed Combat 4

Knowledge Skills: Baseball Stats 2, Mitsuhamas Gossip 5, Mitsuhamas Tech 5, Nagoya Safehouses 5, Origami 2, Triad Traditions 5, English N, Japanese 5

Qualities: Blandness, Erased (10 pts), Guts, High Pain Threshold (15 pts), Murky Link

Augmentations: (All alphas) Adrenaline Pump (3), Datajack

Gear: Actioneer business clothes, 5 antidote patches (Rating 6), armor jacket, chameleon suit, commlink (Novatech Airware with Isis Orb OS), DocWagon Super-Platinum contract, Eurocar Westwind 3000, Harley-Davidson Scorpion, high lifestyle, Mitsubishi Nightsky, smartlink goggles, 10 trauma patches

Weapons:

Hammerli 620S [Light pistol, DV 6S(c) or 4P, AP 0, -half or -4, SA, RC 1, 11(c) w/ internal smartgun link, gas-vent 1, and silencer, regular (20 clips), stick-n-shock (5 clips), and APDS (5 clips) ammo]

HK XM30 [Assault rifle, DV 6P, AP -1 or -5, SA/BF/FA, RC (1), 30(c) w/ regular (20 clips) and APDS (5 clips) ammo]

HK XM30 [Grenade launcher, DV as grenade, AP as grenade, SS, RC 0, 8(c)]

HK XM30 [Shotgun, DV 9P(f), AP +6, SA, RC (1), 10(c) w/ flechette (10 clips) ammo]

HK XM30 [Carbine, DV 5P or 6P, AP 0, SA/BF/FA, RC (1), 30(c) w/ regular (20 clips) and explosive (5 clips) ammo]

HK XM30 [Sniper rifle DV 7P or 6S(c), AP -2 or -half, SA, RC (1), 10(c) w/ regular (15 clips) and stick-n-shock (5 clips) ammo]

HK XM30 [LMG, DV 6P, AP -1 or -5, BF/FA, RC 2 (3), 100(belt) w/ regular (2 belts) and APDS (1 belt) ammo]

Katana [Reach 1, DV 5P, AP -1]

4 fragmentation grenades [Grenade, DV 12(f), AP+5, Blast -1/m]

4 high explosive grenades [Grenade, DV 10P, AP -2, Blast -2/m]

4 flash bang grenades [Grenade, DV 6S, AP -3, Blast 10m radius]

YANKEE

POSTED BY: RISER

VITAL STATS: YANKEE

Age: 66 **Height:** 1.79 m
Weight: 81 kg **Hair:** Salt and pepper
Eyes: Blue **Gender:** Male
Metatype: Human **Awakened:** Yes (Adept)

Let's set the record straight. Yankee isn't my father. He did found the Smoker's Club back in the '50s, and I can honestly say that without his help I wouldn't be who I am today—or even alive, for that matter. We Smokers are *like* a family, but it doesn't mean he put in time with my mom. I think the reason the rumors started is because of how he came up.

- Or maybe the rumors started because that's what Yankee put out there. He ran the father & son cover until the Smokers started bringing on more members. I'm not sure he ever completely dropped the act. It was as if he was cobbling together a makeshift family from the street types he picked up along the way.
- Kat o' Nine Tales

Yankee was raised in New York. He had your typical middle-class life—mom, dad, and dog. Yankee had a knack for sorting out what people wanted to hear and, more importantly, what they wanted to buy. It was clear early on that he had a talent that others didn't, and he used it to get noticed. By the age of twelve he was considered a rising star in data analytics and a shoe-in for the corporate life. That all ended the day he walked in on his father beating his mom. He stepped in and tried to pull his father off, but he was just a kid. His father knocked him unconscious. When Yankee came to, he was lying next to his mother's dead body. His father was in the living room passed out on the couch. Yankee did what I think any son would have done in that situation—he marched into the kitchen, grabbed a butcher's knife, and left it in his father's throat.

The courts understood. Yankee received a suspended sentence and a court-appointed therapist. He wound up in a group home far enough from his old neighborhood to make a fresh start. Suddenly he was a street kid, living in an orphanage and left to fend for himself. His parents weren't wealthy to begin with, and because of the murder his father's family didn't let him have anything from the will.

Before long, Yankee started leading a divided existence. Some distant relative—Yankee either doesn't know who it was, or he just doesn't want to tell—paid for him to go to the prestigious Hunter Academy, one of the top prep schools in the UCAS. Yankee's time at Hunter formed the bedrock of his

extensive contact network, which helped him build his second career.

- Yankee never graduated from Hunter and didn't sit for a class photo, but if you look back at some of the notable graduates from the time he could have been there you'll find names like Christopher Arkins, press secretary for the Manhattan Development Consortium.
- Slamm-O!
- So who was this mystery relative? And what made them cough up the cash?
- Snopes
- Just scanned the images. Some of these people are big-time corporate citizens. Why would they go to a local school?
- Baka Dabora
- That's the way things work in Manhattan. Instead of putting their kids through school in silos, the top execs send all of their kids to the same school. The goal is to learn how the other side thinks and maybe pilfer corporate secrets in the process.
- Mr. Bonds

Every night after going to school with a slew of rich kids, Yankee would go back to the orphanage, which was the type of place where you had to kick someone's ass just to get a pillow to sleep on. It turned out to be more than he could handle. By the time Yankee turned sixteen he was running with gangs, but I'm not going to get into that phase of his life. We're not as close as we used to be, but I'm still not going to give away all of his secrets.

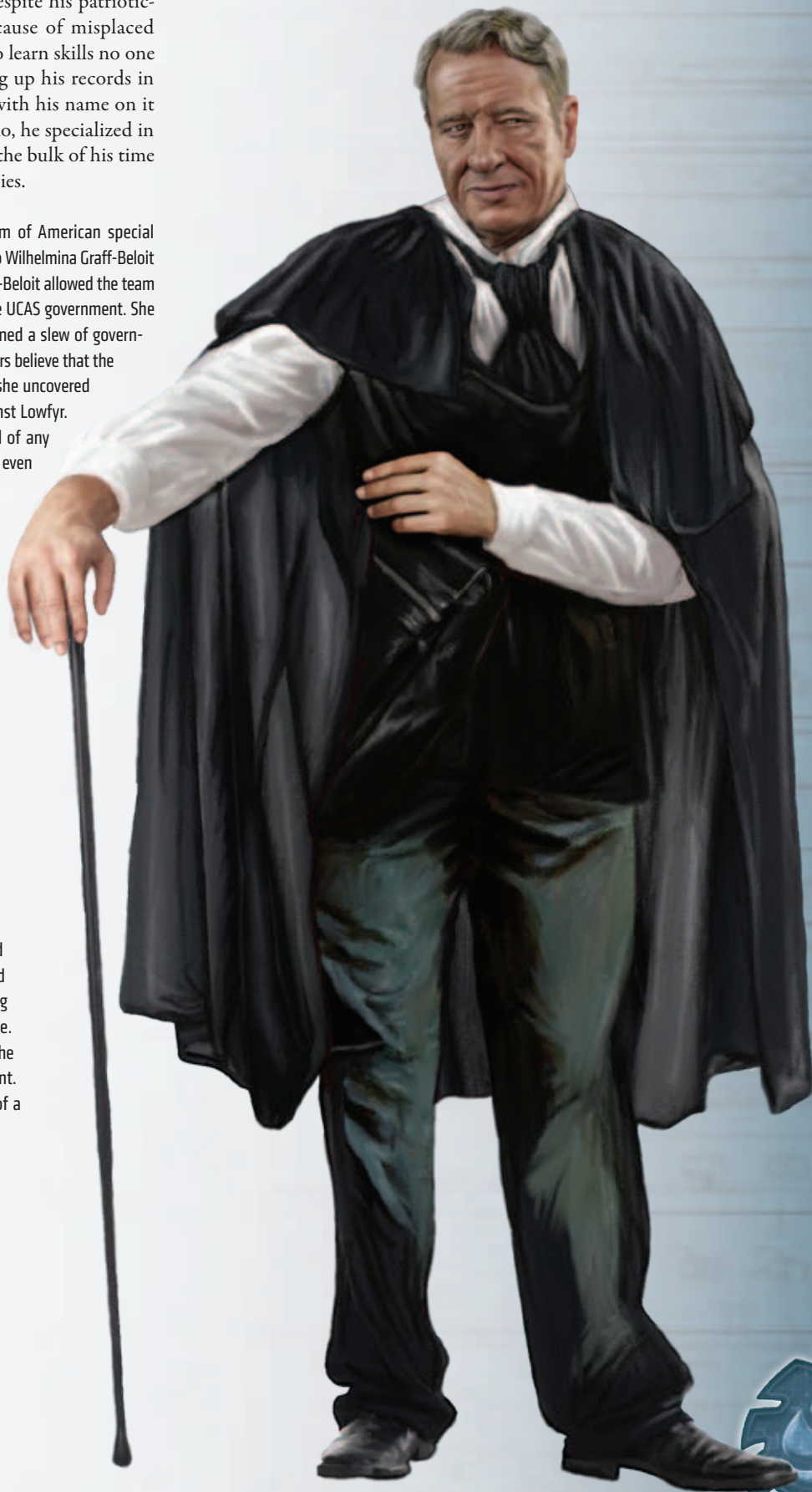
- So what happened between the two of you? Lovers' quarrel?
- Sticks
- Still the asshole, aren't you, Sticks? When we worked together, we were family. Now he's a fixer and I'm a runner. The way we connect is different. He can't represent my interests the way he used to. I will always respect him, but he's a client now. And you never trust the client.
- Riser
- There could be another reason for Riser's silence. I have some friends from the Rotten Apple who used to talk about a guy named Yankee who was a lieutenant for the Cutters gang in New York. They say the years this guy operated for the Cutters overlapped the time Riser lived in the city. That would mean that Yankee played for the same team that Riser did, which would go a long way toward explaining the father-son shtick.
- Fastjack

The day he turned eighteen, Yankee enlisted in the army. He soon found his way into black ops. Despite his patriotic-sounding name, Yankee didn't enlist because of misplaced nationalistic pride. He joined the service to learn skills no one else would teach him. I had my hacker dig up his records in preparation for this post, but everything with his name on it was redacted. If you believe him, which I do, he specialized in counterterrorism. He claims to have spent the bulk of his time in Eastern Europe extracting and flipping spies.

- There have been rumors for years about a team of American special operators who posed as finance and PR assistants to Wilhelmina Graff-Beloit during the EuroWars. According to the legend, Graff-Beloit allowed the team to work close to her in order to win favors with the UCAS government. She was considered a friend of the state, and S-K earned a slew of government contracts in return. A lot of government insiders believe that the governmental connections she made and secrets she uncovered flipping spies helped her to hold out so long against Lowfyr. If Yankee is speaking true, it's the first I've heard of any member of that team stepping out of the shadows, even accidentally.
- Fianchetto

I met Yankee during my first stint in prison. By that time, he had matriculated from black ops to the short con. He got a meeting with me by posing as an attorney who wanted to take my case pro bono. I like to think that I'm a pretty good judge of bullshit, but this guy had me snowed. I didn't know this guy was a fraud until he wanted me to.

- I'm starting to think that Yankee is a social adept, but the talent is not supposed to work when you have that much cyberware jammed inside you.
- Lyran
- He may very well be. Those tests weren't standard yet, nor were adepts fully understood, so he would have just been seen as an exceptionally charming young man with a penchant for reading people. Perhaps if the right people found him early on he could have harnessed some of that magical talent. Instead this is the beginning of a very sad story of a talent squandered.
- Frosty



Yankee tried to recruit me then, but I had other plans. We met up again in '53. By then he had a file on me and a few other guys he was interested in that put official dossiers to shame. The files he had collected formed the basis of the original Smoker's Club. We took the name because of Yankee's penchant for fine cigars and cigarettes, something he says he picked up during his time in Eastern Europe. The double meaning was accidental—in those days, Yankee didn't envision the crew as a wetwork team.

After ten good years, Yankee stepped away from the team in '63. He called it a retirement. He bought a place in New York, a train ride away from the ballpark. That was that, or so we thought.

- Wait—ten years of Smoker's Club runs skipped over just like that? Come on, let's hear some war stories!
- /dev/grrl
- Sometimes the past should just stay in the past. Especially since there are more relevant things to cover.
- Riser

Yankee's retirement was short-lived. One day he simply vanished. All we could figure out at the time was that a private jet took off from Long Island with him on it. All of the plane tickets and flight plans were routed through dummy corporations, so it took some time to figure out who was behind it all—and we were trying, because the trip was totally unannounced. The initial jet landed at JFK, supposedly because of engine problems. Shortly after, another Gulfstream, owned by the same company, departed for London, England. We traced the planes to a firm called Terra Nocti and tracked that back to Wilhelmina Graff-Beloit. Thing was, we know he wasn't going to meet her or any of her people, because they had all been moved to the Zurich Orbital by then.

Three days later Yankee was back in the city. He called us to say goodbye and announced he was moving to Europe. We didn't hear from him again for nearly a year. He called because he needed the name of a mage he could trust who knew the lay of the land in London. We gave him Winterhawk's number.

- I was wondering how he came by my information. Give Seta my thanks. It's been a profitable relationship
- Winterhawk
- Do you kiss and tell?
- Snopes
- I can't go into too much detail, but Yankee wanted me to cover a crew that was retrieving a bio sample from Jonny Spinrad. The crew was supposed to go non-lethal, but he didn't think they had the skillset to pull it off. And he was right. Once we engaged Spinrad's security, the team ran out of patience and switched to lethal rounds. I was forced to knock out one of them in order to keep within mission parameters.
- Winterhawk
- What happened to the sample?
- Baka Dabora

- It wound up in the hands of Claudia Romanov, who used it to prove that Spinrad was the father of her child. That then killed Spinrad's relationship with Queen Caroline.

- 2XL
- Are you suggesting that Yankee orchestrated the reveal of Spinrad's love child as a way for Spinrad to back out of the relationship? There is absolutely no proof of that.
- Snopes
- If the shoe fits ... Anyway, there are a million reasons for Johnny Spinrad to have wanted out of that relationship. The biggest one was money. Just being seen with Queen (then Princess) Caroline put him at the table with Celedyr. Once that connection was formed, he didn't need the Princess anymore. After they broke up, he sold off a bunch of London assets to HKB.
- 2XL

That first England run bolstered Yankee's reputation, and he found England, and later Europe, quite to his liking. He also enjoyed being out of the line of fire (in his later years with the Smoker's Club he'd taken an increasingly behind-the-scenes role), so he gravitated toward fixing work, and after a few miscellaneous freelance gigs, he settled into a more regular job. At least, that's what I heard—he hasn't been too forthcoming with the details.

I won't speculate on who Yankee is arranging things for now, but I can tell you that at this point in his life he is more interested in what's behind the job than how much he is getting paid to set it up. That doesn't mean he's a moral fixer. He just likes to make sure that his agenda and that of his client are pointed in the same direction to avoid any messes.

Rumor holds he lives on a train, never allowing anyone to fix his location long enough to make a kill. A lot of people still want him dead, starting with Chimera. That feud goes back to a time when Sergei Malkenin and Yankee tangled over a hit that Chimera was contracted to perform. The contractor didn't like the timeframe Chimera had presented for the work, so they called in Yankee to see if he had anyone in his stable that would get the job done faster. When Malkenin found out that the contractor was moving behind his back, he killed the contractor and then went after Yankee (with the idea that taking out scabs who are hired to do your work is the best way to discourage that practice). That got Yankee on the frontlines for a while and kept him hopping across the continent for a while. Eventually Chimera became too distracted by other work to keep up his pursuit, but if the opportunity presents itself, he'd be happy to take Yankee out.

The respite from being chased by Chimera has allowed Yankee to re-focus on his work. The Chimera affair caused him a fair amount of frustration, as he was not accustomed to having to run instead of just taking out the people who were annoying him. He was a top-notch shooter in his day, but due to his age, he had taken to relying on negotiation more than gunfire. Chimera prompted him to change. First, he worked to get himself in better shape, and then he made sure that he put his network to better use, keeping allies—particularly allies who owed him a favor—close by at all times, so he could call on support whenever he needed it. He is not the one-man army he might have been when he ran with the Smoker's Club, but he has found a new way to be dangerous.

In the end, that's the message to take away from this little bedtime story. Yankee is older and slower, but he's a veteran. He's found ways to remain dangerous. He's in his mid 60s now, a relic by runner standards, but thanks to his recent conditioning efforts, he moves around pretty good. He tore out most of his older cyberware and sank a fortune into bioware procured from some of the finest shadowclinics Europe has to offer. The result is a fixer that gets through security checkpoints without setting off too many alarms, one that doesn't look nearly as dangerous as he actually is.

- Some people mellow with age, others get crazier. Since he's feeling stronger than he did in his 50s, Yankee is looking to get revenge on those who made his life difficult. The trouble is, when you start taking out people for revenge, the initial feeling is quite satisfying—and addicting. So you start looking for more people to take your revenge on. Before long, you're shooting someone in the head because they slashed your tire twenty-five years ago.
- Pistons
- So?
- Kane

YANKEE

B 4 (7) **A** 3 (6) **R** 4 (6) **S** 4 (6) **C** 6 **I** 5 **L** 6 (8) **W** 5 **M** 4 **Edg** 5 **Ess** 4.0 **Init** 9 (11) **IP** 1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 12/6

Skills: Blades 4, Clubs 3, Computer 4, Data Search 3, Etiquette (Shadowrunning) 1 (+2), Firearms skill group 5, First Aid 3, Influence skill group 5, Intimidation (Physical) 4 (+2), Perception 4, Pilot Aircraft 4, Pilot Ground Craft 3, Stealth skill group 3, Unarmed Combat 4

Knowledge Skills: Assassination Techniques 5, Corrections Systems 3, International Politics 4, Law Enforcement Strategies 3, Manhattan Developer Consortium 3, Runner Groups 4, Seattle Streets 2, UCAS Military Techniques 2, English N, German 3, Japanese 4, Spanish 3

Qualities: Adept, Enemy, First Impression, Will to Live

Adept Powers: Critical Strike 4, Killing Hands, Kinesics 3, Mystic Armor 2

Augmentations: (all deltaware) Bone Density 3, Cerebral Booster 2, Cybereyes (Rating 1, w/ smartlink), Mnemonic Enhancer 2, Muscle Augmentation 2, Muscle Toner 3, Platelet Factories, Synaptic Booster 2

Gear: 100 rounds APDS ammo (light pistol), Commlink (custom, Response 5, Signal 6, Firewall 6, System 4), DocWagon Super-Platinum contract, directional jammer (Rating 8), FFBA full-body suit, 5 x doses laés, maglock passkey (Rating 6), 200 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (100 light pistol, 100 shotgun) tag eraser, Victory Globetrotter Line heavy armor clothing (w/ fire resistance), white noise generator (Rating 5)

Programs: Analyze 4, Armor 3, Browse 4, ECCM 3, Encrypt 4, Sniffer 4, Stealth 4, Track 4

Weapons:

Beretta 200ST [Light pistol, DV 4P or 6S(e), AP — or -4 or -half, SA/BF, RC 1(2), 12 (c), w/ 100 rounds APDS ammo, gas-vent 1, smartgun system, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]

Franchi SPAS-22 [Shotgun, DV 7P or 6S(e), AP -1 or -half, SA/BF, RC 2(3), 10 (m), w/ gas-vent 2, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]



LOOSE ENDS

BY RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN & JAMES D. MEIERS

Lieutenant Rudi Vollstedt shouted the *gehen-gehen-gehen* command over his integrated comm system. His eight-man team burst into action as his order crackled in their ears; half of them, including their mage, gained entry through the windows of the target's living room, where he'd last been spotted. Two rushed through bedroom windows to seal off that avenue of escape. Vollstedt himself and his last team member blasted the lock from the townhome's front door with a Mossberg combatgun and rushed in.

At first, things were precisely as Vollstedt expected. It was music to his ears, all the shattering glass and splintering doors, the muffled thump of flash-bangs going off, the pounding of booted commando feet on faux hardwood floors.

Then he heard the muted cough of a firearm and the sound of one heavily armored body crashing down, then another. He heard the chattering return burst of unsuppressed fire and a shotgunner's blast, the rush of booted feet, another muted cough. He and his breacher bolted down the extravagant entryway through disorienting smoke—who on his team had used a *verdamm!* smoke grenade?—towards the ringing echoes of more gunfire, sweeping left to clear the kitchen then bursting back out into the sprawling living room. Through the haze of smoke, dizzying and half-blinding him even as his cyboptics cycled through vision modes, Vollstedt managed to see an armored corpse lying on the floor. One of his.

Then there came another silenced gunshot from somewhere up ahead, another gurgle of a dying soldier over the lieutenant's

headware. Vollstedt's breacher, just a step ahead of him, rushed toward the action until he stumbled over the corpse of Greta, their aspected spellcaster, and Vollstedt slowed to let him catch his balance. The shotgunner kept falling though, tumbling toward the floor, until he lay sprawled out on his face, bleeding, and only then did the mercenary officer see the tattered hole in the back of his teammate's balaclava, just between his helmet and armored backplate. A second later he registered the sound of a silenced weapon from somewhere behind him, hidden by their hurried, heavy, boot steps. The lieutenant started to spin and raise his submachine gun.

"Anhalten."

The warning froze him. So did the feel of a weapon's muzzle pressing against the back of his neck.

"In the spirit of my new mailing address, I'd like to speak with you in English. Fair enough?" The muzzle was warm, and it wedged itself up under his helmet just a bit. He'd be dead before he hit the ground if the trigger was squeezed. "I know you speak English, laddie, or they wouldn't have sent you on an op here in Denver. Give me a nod."

He nodded, tried to swallow past the sudden fear gripping his throat. Vollstedt's mind raced.

"Swap your Praetor to your left hand, and with your right, drop the magazine and work the bolt for me, aye?" Vollstedt did as he was told. Obedience came instinctively, not only because of the feel of the muzzle at his neck but also due to a certain something in the



lilting voice at his ear. He awkwardly held the empty submachine gun out with his off hand. “Good boy. Now just drop it. Take off your helmet, toss it down the hall.”

Vollstedt hesitated, and his assailant gave him a little nudge with the muzzle. “I know all about the flash-pak built into the helmet’s front, by the by. I helped field-test the things, years back. Now do it.”

He obeyed again, then slowly turned when he felt the gun drift away from him. The smoke was starting to dissipate, swept out of the spacious hallway through ruined windows. He saw an elf dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt standing just a meter or so away from him. There was no trace of blood on him, or any other sign he’d been in a firefight. The elf held an Ares Viper Slivergun trained on Vollstedt. Both the gun and his flashing green eyes stayed steady even as the elf reached, without looking, inside the nearby kitchen. His hand returned holding a steaming cup of tea.

“I’m afraid my kettle finished just before you lads decided to come bursting in. I wasn’t where you planned me to be, from pure, dumb, luck,” the elf said with his Irish lilt, amused more than anything else by the fact that the smallest of things can make the biggest of differences.

Vollstedt had been warned their target would likely have weapons secreted throughout his flat, but they hadn’t been expecting a grenade custom tailored to foul both standard vision and thermographic imaging. Upon their chaotic entry, he imagined the elf plucking the grenade and the pistol from a shelf in the refrigeration unit, just alongside the creamer, next to the butter. There was something surreal about that. There was something strange about his voice, too. Vollstedt couldn’t help but listen as the elf continued.

“It was all downhill for you lads after that, wasn’t it? Only eight men to attack me in my own home, and with no spirit support? Only one spellcaster, and her Greta Schmidt, the junkie?” he said

with an empathetic little sigh. Smoke drifted behind him, revealing more corpses. The elf tsked. “Overconfident work, that. Sloppy. And here I thought a man your age would’ve known better.”

“You killed...” Vollstedt licked his lips as the elf calmly drank a sip of his tea, trying to find words. “All of them are dead, *ja?*”

“Oh, yes. More’s the pity, but you lot knew the rules when you came in like you did. Not a silencer in sight, no real effort made at discretion, and not a one of you with zip ties handy? Not to mention two of your lads with those Mossberg CMDTs. They only fire buckshot, boyo; the chamber doesn’t handle non-lethal munitions quite right. There’s no chance the rest of you lot are here for a capture instead of a kill, when your breachers are carrying those. Oh, and let’s not forget little Greta Schmidt, a trained combat hermetic, being the second through my window. She may be past her prime, but I know full well what damage she could have done.”

Vollstedt got drawn in the longer the elf talked, that voice holding his attention in ways the muzzle of the Slivergun couldn’t. Then came another sip of tea and the slightest droop of elven shoulders showing something like resignation.

“So yes, they’re dead. You lot decided to play by big boys’ rules. I know a bloody kill team when I see one.”

“And me?”

“You and I both know who sent you in the broad sense, aye? Taking off your unit flash doesn’t hide the fact you’re MET 2000. I want to know who sent you, specifically, though. How high up the chain of command. And why?”

“You know why.”

“Fine. I want to know who.”

“*Nein.*”

The elf’s wrist flicked downwards and the Slivergun answered, sending shards of steel into Vollstedt’s shin. They hit

just below the reinforced kneecap of his armor and just above where the Kevlar-woven fabric of his combat boots stopped. The old soldier's leg buckled, and he stumbled against the wall to keep from falling.

"Listen to me," the elf said, turning emerald green eyes on Rudi. Something in those eyes made it impossible for the mercenary to look away. Something in that voice cut through the pain of his ruined leg and made him pay attention. "I know a hundred places that armor doesn't cover, and I'm pretty sure my dossier told you what kind of shot I am, aye? So please. Let's save time. Who was it that ... that ..." The elf let out another sigh.

"Ah, damn. Why even bother?" The elf let the Slivergun's muzzle drift downward. He leaned against the same wall and looked almost his age, for a moment, there in the half-light. "I'm so bloody tired of going through these motions. I'm tired of playing this game."

His sullen, exasperated tone made Vollstedt feel like he'd awoken from some spell. Green eyes swept the bloodstained hallway, spotting where frantic merc fire had sent rounds blasting through the decorated interior walls. For an instant the elven gunman looked like any other homeowner just frustrated with a mess made in the sanctity of his condo.

"I suppose this Baird cover of mine's well and truly fucked, and it only now just hit me. Damn it. I was really starting to like Denver. A place this big, it's not cheap, ye know." The elf took in a long breath, then let it out in a deeper, heartfelt sigh. "Listen. I'm sorry about your shin. But, believe you me, they'll love to buy you a new one."

Vollstedt spat something in German, knowing full well from the elf's dossier that there was an appropriate level of fluency there for the insult to hit home.

"Stop being rude. I'm doing you the biggest favor of your life right now." The elf's eyes turned a little sharper, and the Slivergun's muzzle drifted back up and into play. "So you listen to me. I'm just tired of all this. That's why I quit, and that's the only reason. I've got plenty of money squirreled away. I didn't stop working for them in order to sell a single damned one of their silly fucking secrets. I don't need the money, you hear me? I'm not going to sell anyone anything. You tell them that."

The elf threw the teacup down and let it add to the chaos and destruction on his floor, looking disgusted. Frustrated. Angry.

"You tell them I've always *had* money to vanish, and enough covers. I've been at this game a long damned time, and everyone that plays it knows the rules and has back doors open as a matter of bloody principle. I've got enough SINS set up to keep trading them for your eight man kill teams, every time you find me. *Tell them that.*" His eyes turned hard as emeralds, and his tone made Vollstedt lock eyes with him, made him listen, made him want to relay the message. "You tell them that I can play the attrition game and that they're losing money on trying to kill me. I've got plenty of boltholes and covers ready to go."

Vollstedt blinked before the elf did, shaking off the melodic power of the elf's soft lilt. He cleared his throat a second later. He'd always known this job would kill him.

"What if ..." The merc coughed, then looked back up at the elf with a defiant smirk on his face. "What if it's more than an eight-man kill team next time?"

Emerald eyes narrowed in understanding. The Slivergun coughed, and Vollstedt's other shin splintered. He grunted in pain as his knees hit the fake hardwood floor, then he glared up in anger as the elf stooped to pick up Vollstedt's Praetor and slapped the magazine home. The elf's head tilted a bit to one side, as if he was listening for something. A heartbeat later he heard it, judging by the way he started to turn and walk down the hallway.

"Don't be smug. No one likes that." He half turned back, regarding Vollstedt over one shoulder. The elf racked the slide on the Praetor, chambering a round and shouldering it smoothly. "All you and your headware have done is get more of your own lads killed."

He vanished around the corner, leaving Rudi Vollstedt to bleed in the hallway and think about armored corpses.

"Oh. I just remembered ..." said the elf leaning back around the corner, the muzzle of Rudi's own carbine leading the way. His eyes, past the weapon's iron sights, were hard and cold. "Right shortly, I'll have eight more lads to choose a more likeable messenger from."

The Praetor fired. Vollstedt joined his team.



Rory Caolain—Agent Thorn—was going to miss his Michael Baird cover. He'd had a week and a half of cross-continent travel to get used to the idea Baird was gone, but that didn't mean he was happy about it. As he wove his café racer through Washington, FDC, traffic, he held a funeral in his head. Whenever a cover identity was well and truly blown, whenever it was time to say goodbye forever, Thorn gave them a proper imaginary send-off, celebrating the work he'd done as them, cutting all ties with them, and reminding himself they were gone and untouchable in the future. He had spent eighteen months as Baird the first time, dropped the identity when he was sent off on other assignments, and then picked it back up and had now spent almost four years as the man.

They'd been heady times, the Baird jobs. He'd been running guns and explosives through the Denver smuggler pipelines into Portland, then giving tips to the anti-Tír insurgent groups on how best to use them. Military Advisor was an innocuous term for very bloody work. Argus had sent him there because they knew about his INLA days, about his clashes with the other Tír back across the Atlantic, and because they knew he was an expert on surviving in the face of an oppressive magical regime. What's more, he could help the locals get in a good swing every now and then and blacken the eye of even Tír Ghosts. The work was hard and dangerous, but seldom dull.

So when he'd formally quit Argus all these years later and decided on Denver as a place to settle down, the Baird identity—SIN matched up to a Denver mailing address, never pinned down for criminal activity in the UCAS, and with fond memories and plenty of local contacts attached—had seemed a reasonable choice to dust off and wear again. Sadly, what had provided eighteen

months of cover in both UCAS and Tír systems, then forty-six more months of wild Rinelle ke'Tesrae work years later, had been peeled open and savaged by the heavy-handed idiots of MET 2000 in barely a month. Damn their databases. Damn him for forgetting how many Argus files existed about his successes as Baird.

And damn that red light.

His Triumph motorcycle was flashing a red warning at him, his AR visor filling up with notices of an impending collision. He scowled as he braked, working handlebar lever and foot pedal in tandem, barely stopping the thing in time. Eye-flicks sent warning popups out of his field of vision as his SmartHelmet registered and responded to his commands, and before long, he had a clearer view of the street ahead, overlaid only with his basic GPS navigational map. He forced himself to focus—this lovely machine had spent far too long under a dust cover in storage, and Thorn was a little rusty on it—by telling himself that getting crushed by some politico's limousine would be a horribly anticlimactic death.

He leaned low over the handlebars, trying to worry only about the road and the ride, banishing Baird, both Tírs, Argus, MET 2000, and all the other clutter from his head. After all this, he still had a lunch date to keep, and it wouldn't do to keep a lady waiting. Traffic here in Kansai Village wasn't the worst in the city, but he wasn't the only one on his way to lunch at the Waterfront, either. What's more, he knew he'd need his head cleared to handle a conversation with her.

She was stunning. Thorn had to admit it as he parked and swung a leg over his Triumph. He'd known what she looked like ahead of time, of course. He had done his fair share of homework prior to their meeting and knew more than most people did about how to change his appearance. All the same, the resemblance was remarkable. Daviar look-alikes were a dime a dozen, even if the fad had peaked nearly a decade ago, but this one was remarkable. Something about her, or about the streetside café she'd chosen, reminded him of Paris.

Her, he thought as he wove through tables. The tables and chairs might look like something from a Paris café, but the background noise was all wrong. DC worked too hard, especially in this Shiawase-controlled part of town. Paris had different priorities.

"Miss Corinna, I presume?" Thorn gave her a smile as he slid into the seat opposite hers, helmet settled quietly onto the ground near his feet. His comfortable Irish lilt was gone, his accent of the moment pure public schooled English. "Dreadfully sorry to be late. I'd underestimated traffic."

"Not at all. You're just in time, Mister ..."

There was a hint of a questioning tone as she trailed off, politely letting him know she wasn't certain what identity he was operating under at the moment.

"Carter, ma'am." He smiled, all blond hair and blue eyes that day, a fair-skinned British icon since he'd chosen this SIN. Wire-rimmed glasses rested lightly on the bridge of his nose, giving his boyish look a faintly academic spin. A glowing Union Jack on his t-shirt peeked out through the front of his unzipped Ace of Clubs Vashon Island jacket. "But please, call me Michael."

"Michael, then." She graced him with a smile as she reached

across the table to politely shake hands. She was darker than him, somehow earthier. He knew she was a fake, knew she wasn't really the Estonian who'd worked as the face of a dragon, but from everything he'd read and seen about the original, this one was a flawless copy. The accent was off, but that was to be expected from someone living in DC as long as she had.

They shared small talk as a waitress arrived, and Corinna, as the café regular, got Thorn's blessing to order for them both. When their drinks arrived, and they knew they had time before their waitress's return, the foreplay was finished, and talk turned to business.

"Everything I arranged is ready?" He sipped at his ice water, blond eyebrow quirked.

"And awaiting your pick-up at this address." She smiled again, leaning forward slightly as she slid something across the table.

She knew the old plays, Thorn realized; the smile and the way her reach made the Zoé suit-dress fall open just enough for cleavage to catch the eye. They were tricks used to conceal the act of passing a note, tricks an elf-gorgeous operative like Corinna could use to draw the eye away from some slip of paper. It made sense for her, working as she did and where she did, to know the rules to this particular game. The actual hard paper note was a refreshing change of pace, though. He thought of his own bike, and suppressed a smile. He reminded himself that retro was fashionable—and besides, no one could hack a slip of paper.

"And the new commlink will be there?"

"With the rest of the information you requested, yes." She smiled again, all sugar and spice, broadcasting for anyone nearby—and the pair of them caught a few curious eyes—that they were just a pair of friends eating lunch. That was the trick to talking shop in public, both of them knew. Chat like you always would. Whispering made people listen. Talking casually made people ignore you.

"Our Japanese associate is in the contacts list of your new Hermes Ikon."

They'd both gotten what they were after, and the meal continued. They were just friends eating lunch, elves sharing overpriced ciabatta sandwiches at a trendy organic café. Neither of them used words like murder, or target, or assignment, or even favor. Neither discussed ammunition, firearms, detonators, or explosives. He'd transferred the credits already; they'd worked out the details through intermediaries—one last favor from Baird's old contacts as Thorn had been driving his way East—long before he'd arrived in DC. The face-to-face meeting was just a courtesy; one professional vacationing in the territory of another, with the both of them wanting the chance to politely appraise the other.

Thorn finished his sandwich, shook hands again over polite small talk concerning the media interest in recent mystical disturbances, and they parted ways. As he saddled his Triumph again, and she strode away towards a sleek BMW, he knew they wouldn't meet again until at least one man was dead.

CERBERUS

POSTED BY: PLAN 9

VITAL STATS: CERBERUS

The normal vital statistics do not apply to Cerberus.

A little over a week ago, a file appeared on my commlink. Just appeared there, slipped past my spam filter (and for that matter, my firewall) with nary a blip. After I got over the initial paranoia—you know, going over my commlink with a fine-toothed comb three times, looking for what they took, what they changed—I was more than a little intrigued. So I read the thing. And I did some digging. And what I found out was, frankly, shocking.

And yes, this is coming from me.

The file was a jumbled mess of declassified and redacted internal memoranda, dating from all the way back in 2050 right up until this year, concerning something called Project Cerberus. The notes included with it said that it had been put together by a hacker named Neurosis. When I realized what I was looking at, I got the chills immediately. If you don't realize why yet, don't worry, I'll explain. Project Cerberus got its start with a Seattle-based R&D company called Emerging Futures, which back in the dog days of the '50s was under contract to Ares to try and hook animals up to the Matrix.

- Why?
- Snopes
- The thinking of the day—and ya gotta remember that this is back when SmartFrames and SKs were considered bleeding edge—was that they could create literal Matrix watchdogs. Leverage the processing power of an organic brain for Matrix security. Cheaper, more effective agents was the idea. As history makes it clear, it didn't exactly work out.
- Bull
- SmartFrames? SKs? Never mind. I don't want to know.
- /dev/grrl

Emerging Futures got bought out by Ares, and then it got taken over by Transys Neuronet in 2057. Then, after the Second Crash, it became part of NeoNET along with Transys during the merger. According to the files I was leaked, the single largest budgetary draw of Emerging Futures has always been something called Project Cerberus, a codename that refers to none other than Eliohann, who from the 2050s until Crash 2.0 was both

the CEO of Emerging Futures and the sole test subject of Project Cerberus.

Eliohann was the only dragon known to have a functioning datajack installed. Back in 2047, he was your ordinary, run-of-the-mill western dragon, and he spent most of his time wandering around the Sinsearch Tribal lands near Tír Tairngire. He was just a kid—whatever that means by dragon standards, anyway—when he was abducted (by shadowrunners) and turned into a guinea pig in an Emerging Futures laboratory. The early-generation datajack they fitted him with was not without complications, which is a nice way of saying that the cognitive dissonance it caused him drove him insane.

- I actually feel bad for him. Imagine being kidnapped and experimented on like that.
- Sunshine
- Aw, lookit da poor cuddly widdle dwagon. Give me a fucking break.
- Jimmy No

Before, during, and after his freak-out, Eliohann was able to learn quite a bit about the way the world worked through the live Matrix connection that Emerging Futures provided him with (or some might say forced upon him). Enough, apparently, to arrange—using a combination of the Matrix and astral projection—for intermediaries to purchase a majority share in the Emerging Futures corporation on his behalf. Eliohann was, quite literally, a self-made dragon.

- So he bought the company that he was a test subject of ... while he was a test subject? Well color me impressed.
- Kat o' Nine Tales

Ares, which had its eye on Emerging Futures and its hooks in the company, was not pleased. They sent a professional kick squad to sanitize Project Cerberus—which they hadn't authorized anyway—but Eliohann escaped death. Barely. The details, as I've been able to dig them up, get fuzzy here, but through the intervention of some runners who are no longer with us, Ares and Eliohann were able to come to an arrangement. Namely, Ares bought the company and brought Eliohann on board as the head researcher. The ambitious middle managers responsible for Project Cerberus didn't fare so well.

That was the status quo until 2057. Eliohann became completely immersed in Matrix research, with himself as the primary subject. In fact, he spent so much of his time in the Matrix that it wouldn't be unfair to call him a junkie. The effects it had on him were severe, and surprisingly well documented. In fact, it's those side effects that probably prevented Eliohann/Emerging Futures from claiming the bequest in Dunkelzahn's will. Chances are, he was still working out the kinks and biding his time when Crash 2.0 happened. Anyway, by 2057 Eliohann had already developed the beginnings of a severe dissociative

disorder, with symptoms of genuine dissociative personality disorder.

Ares kept Elio hann tightly under wraps. It wasn't until 2057 that the great dragon Celedyr first learned of Elio hann and Emerging Futures. Elio hann was a highly paid Ares employee at the time, so a lot of runners got work as Transys Neuronet campaigned and negotiated to arrange Elio hann's defection. Apparently, my mysterious benefactor, Neurosis, was one of them, and was nearly flatlined by Ares IC during the extraction proper. In any case, for the last time in his life, Elio hann switched sides.

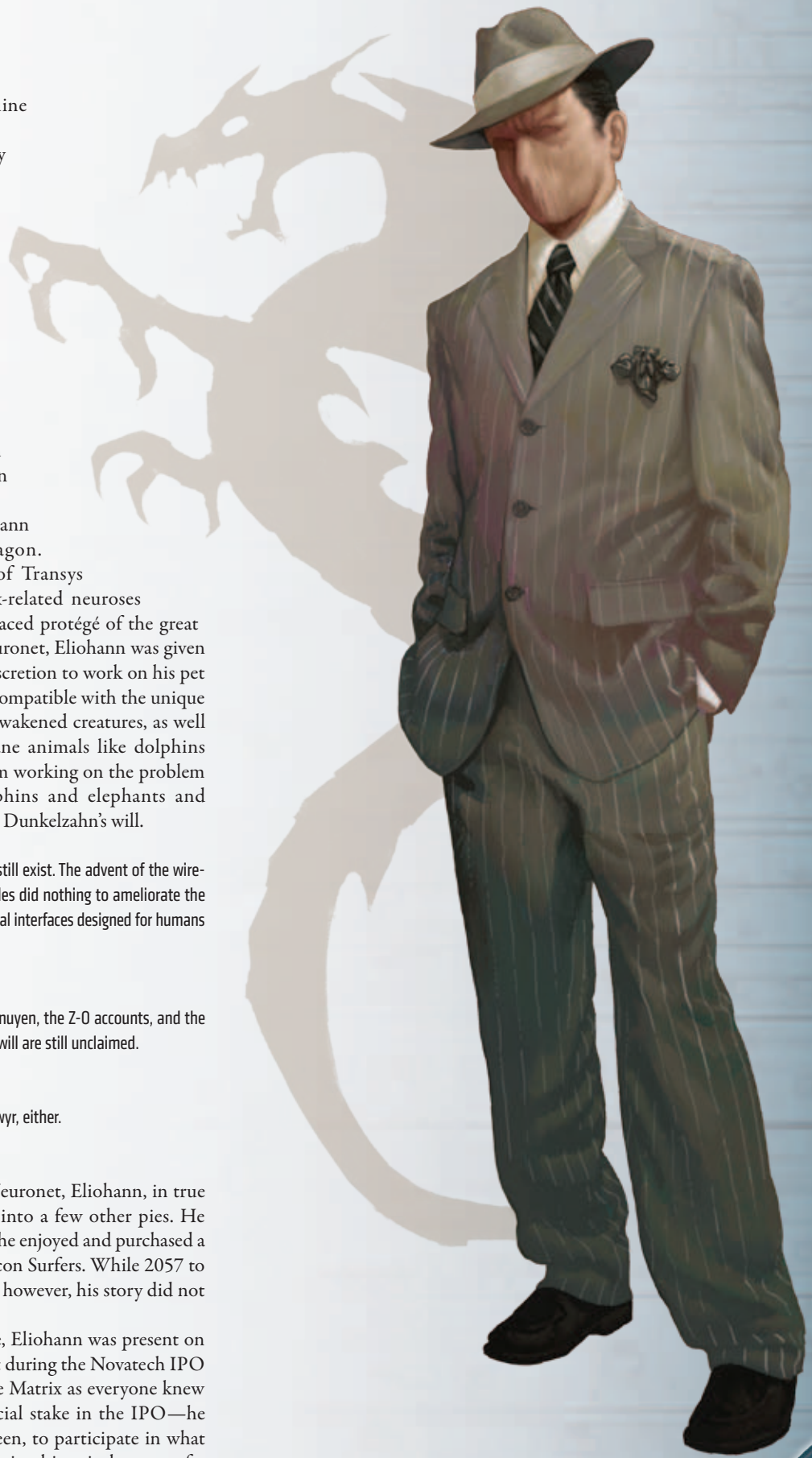
From 2057 to Crash 2.0, Elio hann was a determined, driven dragon. An upgraded datajack courtesy of Transys Neuronet put most of his Matrix-related neuroses on the back burner. As a highly placed protégé of the great dragon Celedyr within Transys Neuronet, Elio hann was given nearly unlimited funds and total discretion to work on his pet project—creating a datajack safely compatible with the unique physiology of dragons and other Awakened creatures, as well as some highly intelligent mundane animals like dolphins and elephants. Celedyr also had him working on the problem of communication between dolphins and elephants and metahumanity, a separate bequest in Dunkelzahn's will.

- As far as I know, both of these problems still exist. The advent of the wireless Matrix and the era of nanopaste trodes did nothing to ameliorate the fundamental incompatibility between neural interfaces designed for humans and non-human neurophysiology.
- Nephrine
- Which would mean that the forty million nuyen, the Z-0 accounts, and the island in the Caymans from Dunkelzahn's will are still unclaimed.
- Mr. Bonds
- Mustn't forget the personal visit from Lofwyr, either.
- Elijah

Besides his work for Transys Neuronet, Elio hann, in true dragon fashion, reached his claws into a few other pies. He invested in several Matrix clubs that he enjoyed and purchased a stake in the management of the Silicon Surfers. While 2057 to 2064 were good years for Elio hann, however, his story did not come to a happy ending.

Like everyone who was anyone, Elio hann was present on the East Coast Stock Exchange host during the Novatech IPO that turned out to be the end of the Matrix as everyone knew it. He most likely had some financial stake in the IPO—he was certainly there to see and be seen, to participate in what was supposed to be one of the defining historical events of a generation (and boy, was it ever).

Like so many on the morning of November 2nd, Elio hann flatlined, his mind shredded by the Jormungand virus, leaving



behind only a lifeless, comatose husk. Unlike most, however, Eliohann did not have his plug pulled. He was never buried or cremated. Instead, he was kept on life support indefinitely, with orders from Celedyr himself not to disconnect him from the Matrix under any circumstances. The file I received included a copy of those orders. I also have financial statements showing that Project Cerberus' budgetary draws from Emerging Futures/Transys spiked immediately after Crash 2.0 and then leveled out at the same numbers they had been while Eliohann was alive. But it gets better.

I have records showing that for the past decade or so the "dead" dragon has continued to attend Emerging Futures and Transys Neuronet shareholder meetings, and has been *casting the votes* that his shares allow him. But I can do even better than that. As you're reading this, think hard about the business you've done over the past ten years. Have you ever done any work for anyone on the Matrix calling themselves Cerberus?

- Are you kidding? I ran into half a dozen guys called Cerberus last week. It's kind of a popular name, you know? Along with Hades, Loki, Baal, and all the rest of that mythological crap. If it's a character in a fairy tale by a dead culture, chances are some smooth operator or ten is calling himself that.
- Slamm-O!
- Look at you in your glass house, throwing stones.
- Netcat

This Cerberus appears most often as a silver, three-headed mastiff with glowing green eyes. However, he's also appeared as a boring, literally faceless grey-clad corporate suit, a terribly dull icon that is usually perfectly rendered, sometimes with, sometimes without, a silver lapel pin of a three headed mastiff. My research has revealed that several runner teams—who will remain nameless—have been contacted by this entity to perform various errands. Their legwork, in turn, has indicated that these runs have generally served the interests of the great dragon Celedyr.

- I can confirm. I actually took one of these jobs a few years back. The Johnson—your Cerberus, I guess, although he called himself N—wanted a file retrieved from a secure corporate lab. I won't say whose or where. The file, when we recovered it, turned out to be an AI. Chatty little bitch. The damn thing would not shut up on the entire way out. It seemed to be happy to see the Johnson, and we were assured the entire thing was catch and release.
- Rigger X
- I actually passed on such a job once. The Johnson—whose icon matched your description to a tee—wanted a black-box system retrieved from one of the sealed-off upper layers of the SCIRE. I took a pass on that one. I don't want to find out what Deus left behind, not for that kind of money. Never did learn what was supposed to be in the black box.
- Ma'Fan

As even the thickest of you must realize by now, the point of this long history lesson is that Eliohann did not die at all. At least not on the Matrix. On the Matrix his life has continued, as a ghost-in-the-machine, a pure virtual gestalt. In this form, he seems to still be pursuing the same interests he had in life. He's managing his corporate affairs at Emerging Futures, acting as a

Johnson and general middleman for Celedyr, and leading research into non-metahuman Matrix interfaces, communication, and even researching the very phenomena that cause his own continued consciousness. Of course, it may not be fair to say that Eliohann is Cerberus or that Cerberus is Eliohann. As a matter of fact, from the stories I've heard, Eliohann/Cerberus seems to have sublimated his draconic nature entirely, embracing his nature as a creature purely of the Matrix.

- Okay. I've gone long enough without interjecting. You do realize what you're positing is strictly impossible, right? Even if we can make the big leap to assume that the rumors about ghosts in the machine are the truth, a dragon could not become one. Dragons are inherently magical creatures, and their existence, their soul, cannot be translated to the Matrix. It would be like saying that a free spirit was a ghost in the machine. Ridiculous. Dragons just don't work that way.
- Winterhawk
- They said outfitting a dragon with a datajack was impossible too.
- Clockwork
- Nice try, but a datajack and a ghost in the machine are not nearly on the same level.
- Snopes
- By the standards of ten or even twenty years ago, how many "impossible" things have we each done before breakfast today? Here in the Sixth World, the idea of what is or is not possible isn't a fixed constant that's set in stone. It's constantly changing, constantly evolving. It's that rigid, dogmatic "that's impossible" thinking that causes the great dragons, the Tir honchos, and the rest of the grand high poobahs at the Elf Only table to laugh smugly down at the rest of us from their ivory towers.
- Frosty
- Oh, is that what it is? Good to know.
- Bull
- Those ideas you're espousing seem familiar, Frosty. Have you been reading Ebran the Scribe?
- Icarus
- A possibility you're ignoring is that it's not necessary that the e-ghost Cerberus actually *be* Eliohann in any vague, metaphysical sense. What's important is that Cerberus certainly seems to *believe* that he is Eliohann, or at least a copy of him, has been granted all the accorded privileges by Celedyr, and has been acting accordingly.
- Plan 9

Lastly, the file I received included some tantalizing hints as to what Cerberus might be up to in the future. We have the anecdotal evidence that Celedyr has been gathering AIs and other Matrix curiosities, so there's that. I also have internal memoranda that along with a Dr. Gordon Browne, Cerberus is the manager of a top secret Transys Neuronet research think tank called Project Imago. The project goals and specifications were too well protected for me to dig up anything concrete, but it seems to have something to do with mind uploading.

But Cerberus seems to be handling Transys Neuronet, Celedyr, and NeoNET shadow assets across the board, popping

up in the oddest of places. The most recent rumors have an icon matching his description coordinating Knights of Rage and independent assets against Horizon's Singularity subsidiary. As you might imagine, his status as an e-ghost makes it difficult for him to get his hands dirty, but as much as the Matrix is his home, I had at least one runner report seeing him "in the field." Supposedly, he was piloting—although "possessing" might be a more apt word—an MCT Akiyama drone. If you've ever seen one, you know exactly how creepy that is. Whoever this Neurosis is, I wouldn't want to be him right now, but he seemed fairly emphatic in his notes that I name him as my source if I publish this information, so I've honored his wishes.

- I don't think you have to worry about Neurosis, *omae*. Neurosis—the *real* Neurosis—didn't "almost flatline" during Eliohann's extraction. He did flatline. I know a friend of a friend.
- Pistons
- Then that would mean ...
- Slamm-0!
- That Cerberus is using the Neurosis name, as well, yes. Ever since he was *really* alive.
- The Smiling Bandit
- If Neurosis is Cerberus, that means that Cerberus himself wanted us to have this information. That he wanted me to announce all of this to the world. I can't say I'm entirely surprised with everything I've learned about him. This infodump here is his coming-out party, just like he wanted (although Ghost knows why). It also means that all of the information that I just gave you has been fully vetted by him.
- Plan 9
- Of course I want you all to know about my resurrection. The Greeks and Romans had the Phoenix, the Egyptians had their Osiris, the Christians had Lazarus, and the Matrix has me.
- Neurosis
- Uh, 'Jack? Why is *he* here?
- Glitch
- Because he asked nicely, because he has some very interesting insights to share about the wilder side of the Matrix in general, and most importantly because he genuinely seems to be exactly what he claims to be, and my curiosity is piqued. If you have a problem with him, his rep button is right there. Just like any member, AI, technomancer, or regular joe. I'm restricting Neurosis's access to this thread, for now, at least until we see how this pans out.
- Fast|Jack
- Lazarus? Is that really how you think of yourself, Neurosis?
- Fianchetto
- On the contrary. I'm not that special. I'm here for business, like the rest of you. My rebirth—my current state—changes little. I don't claim to be the first, and I'm sure I won't be the last. On a microcircuit board, we will all be born again.
- Neurosis

CERBERUS

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
—	—	—	—	7	8	7	9	—	5	—	13	3

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 13

Skills: Computer 7, Cybercombat 7, Data Search 7, Electronic Warfare 7, Gunnery 5, Hacking 7, Infiltration 5, Influence skill group 5, Software 7, Perception 5, Pilot Anthroform (Biped) 5 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Ares Personnel 3, Corporate Politics 4, Futurist Theories 5, Great Dragons 6, Matrix Hardware 5, NeoNET Personnel 4, Psychology 3, Singularity Research 4, 21st Century History 4, Wuxia Action Trids 3, English N, German 4, Japanese 5, Sperethiel 6

Qualities: Code Flux, Corruptor, Drone Pilot, Fragmentation (Dissociative Identity Disorder), Redundancy, Rootkit

Gear: Mitsuhamma Akiyama drone [Handling +3, Accel 5/15, Speed 40, Body 4, Armor 10, Sensor 6 w/ body stabilizer (Rating 3), chameleon coating, cyborg adaptation, ECM (Rating 6), gecko tips, 2 x mechanical arms, walker, Response 6, Signal 6, System 6, Firewall 6], Transys Cú Roí Nexus (home node) [Response 6, Signal 6, System 7, Firewall 6 with Rating 6 IC Agent running Analyze 6, Armor 6, Black Hammer 6, Stealth 6, Exploit 6, and Track 6].

Programs: Analyze 7, Armor 7, Attack 7, Browse 7, Black Hammer 7, Command 7, Edit 7, Exploit 7, Reality Filter 7, Scan 7, Spoof 7, Stealth 7, Track 7.

Note(s): Cerberus' stats are dependent on the node to which he is subscribed. The stats listed are for his home node. Cerberus' initiative is equal to Intuition + Response, and his Matrix Condition Monitor is equal to 10 plus half his System rating.

HESTABY

POSTED BY: FROSTY

VITAL STATS: HESTABY

Age: In her metahuman form, Hestaby appears as a female human in her late 30s or early 40s, with striking features. There is no definite information on how old Hestaby truly is, but it is likely she is well over 3,000 years old.

VITAL STATS: METAHUMAN FORM

Height: 1.78 m **Weight:** ~60 kg
Hair: Auburn **Eyes:** Brown
Gender: Female **Race:** Human
Metatype: Great Western Dragon
Awakened: Yes

It sometimes seems like the great dragon Hestaby can't catch a break. She has struggled with the problem of being overshadowed by events in North America ever since she made her first public appearance in 2053, when she intervened and put a violent end to the advance of Tír Tairngire troops on Mount Shasta. Even as she was establishing the Mount Shasta Dam and the surrounding areas as her own domain, her fellow great dragon in North America, Dunkelzahn, was hard at work impressing the masses in the UCAS and building up his own reputation as "the dragon of the people." News of the official recognition of Dunkelzahn's citizenship, his subsequent election as the UCAS president, his death, and the emergence of his will captivated the attention of millions of people around the world. Millions more were later enamored with the establishment of the Draco Foundation (DF) and the Dunkelzahn Institute for Magical Research (DIMR). These two institutions ensured that the legacy of a truly unique and popular political icon would live on for generations to come. And many in the media were all too happy to romanticize this notion and to once more steal the thunder away from Hestaby and her agenda on the West Coast.

By the time the media frenzy surrounding Dunkelzahn and the mysterious circumstances under which he had died had finally subsided, Ghostwalker returned to Earth and made his spectacular entrance into Denver. When Hestaby started making headlines of her own by becoming a Tír Prince in 2062, there were more than a few newsnets that chose instead to focus on Lofwyr and Aithne Oakforest, and their mysterious resignations from the Council of Princes. Despite these many setbacks, Hestaby made some headway in garnering international recognition for herself by speaking out against

the atrocities that General Saito was accused of committing against metahumans in his California Protectorate, as well as voicing her support for the child emperor Yasuhito and his revolutionary reforms, which included shutting down the metahuman concentration camps on Yomi Island. Doing so often brought Hestaby into direct conflict with groups such as Humanis, the Human Nation, and Alamos 20K. Even those sensational headlines would soon be drowned out, however, by the dramatic fall of the Tír Tairngire Council of Princes during the second Matrix Crash.

Since that time, Matrix bloggers have speculated on whether Hestaby's influence in North America was beginning to wane after years of relative quiet from the "Orange Queen," who, until recently, has appeared mainly focused on the rebuilding and reconstruction efforts within Tír Tairngire. Her most recent public accomplishments seem to have been limited to the Tír itself, including advocating for the opening of the Tír borders to outsiders, encouraging trade and commerce in an effort to rebuild the Tír economy, and working tirelessly to establish a lasting peace between the Tír nation and the residents of the Northern Crescent region (a peace and a stability that continues to elude her).

With her speech that she so eloquently delivered to the United Nations General Assembly on July 23, 2073, however, Hestaby has catapulted herself into the international spotlight and has dramatically increased her visibility within both the dragon and the metahuman cultures. In her speech, Hestaby established herself as a firm supporter for developing stronger relations between dragons and metahumans. She was seen by both the UN and the general public as a bold trailblazer, courageously turning her back on millennia-old dragon traditions and siding with metahumans to condemn the terrorist acts of SIRRURG in South America. Her speech and her public support were seen as giving the UN the political will to finally end their squabbling and vote on the charges against SIRRURG, leading them to indict the great dragon as a war criminal only a few weeks after her speech. Hestaby set herself up as a dragon of reason and intellect, willing to be seen as an advocate for justice and the rule of metahuman law, while also being perceived as working to preserve the lives of her fellow great dragons, even one as violent and as ruthless as SIRRURG. Hestaby did what she felt was necessary to expose the growing threat she believed her fellow great dragons posed to metahumanity. She believed that their growing animosity toward metahumanity for what Aztlán did to Dzitbalché in 2064, and their growing ambitions to prove their dominance over metahumanity, were creating a dangerous, untenable situation. Her speech put her personal safety at risk, as some of her peers did not appreciate her words and would be happy to see her permanently silenced for her unconventional and outrageous methods.



- Okay, I have to interrupt here. Hestaby is no guardian angel, no patron saint of metahumans, no martyr or whatever you want to call her. She is a media whore. She will do whatever she has to do to capture the spotlight and to present herself in a light that makes it appear that she is working in all of our best interests. The fact of the matter is, she crafts her public image as carefully as any megacorporation. And I doubt that it is a coincidence that the new Tír Tairngire government now enjoys a very close relationship with Horizon, the leading PR megacorp of the world. I am certain that Hestaby has her talons buried deep into that relationship, and that as a result, she is getting much more positive press because of it than what she would normally be able to get on her own. With her very carefully crafted public image, there's no way of telling what her true agenda is. For all we know, it could very well be similar to Lofwyr's (if not worse).

-

- Well, Mr. Anonymous, I'm glad you feel secure in your anonymity in calling Hestaby a "media whore." Hestaby has had access in the past to Shadowland, and is believed to still have access to ShadowSea under the handle "Orange Queen." What you said here may very well get back to her. And unless you're someone as powerful as another great dragon or have some very powerful friends, you better watch your back. She doesn't take slights to her character lightly.

- Slamm-O!

- I make no apologies for what I have said. The truth stands for itself. Last year alone, Hestaby sent out more press releases than Lofwyr himself (and that's not even counting all the "leaks" that were made about her scheduled appearances, alerting the media to what she was doing and where she was going to be). There's something wrong with that, in my humble opinion.

-

- Are you sure you're not Eyebright? Your rant sounds an awful like his post to Shadowland years ago.

- Bull

Shortly after giving her speech, Hestaby learned that a close personal friend of hers, the head of the Shasta Shamans, Eliot Eyes-of-Wyrm, had been killed by an assassin wielding a German-made sniper rifle. It is believed Hestaby had known Eyes-of-Wyrm ever since he first founded the Shasta Shamans magical group back in 2055. Many saw Eyes-of-Wyrm as the closest thing Hestaby had to a metahuman translator. In public, they appeared to share the same political views and the same goals. For years, Eyes-of-Wyrm was often seen traveling in her company throughout the Tír, working with Hestaby to try to build diplomatic relations between the Tír nobility and metahumans who lived in the Northern Crescent region.

Hestaby clearly blamed Lofwyr for Eyes-of-Wyrm's death, and after spending a week mourning her dear friend, she struck back, targeting several Saeder-Krupp assets. Her retaliation fueled worldwide speculation about the possibilities of a full-on dragon civil war, with loyalties between the dragons dividing as some clung to their staunchly held traditions while others decided that perhaps their relationships with metahumans might indicate that changes were needed. Masaru and Rhonabwy have publicly shown their support for Hestaby, and both are believed to be staunch, pro-metahuman dragons. Lofwyr, for the first time since his Awakening, has begun reaching out for support from within the dragon culture, turning to dragons that were



once his sworn enemies but who might sympathize with him based on their ideas of survival of the fittest.

Rhetoric from anti-dragon and anti-metahuman factions seems to be polarizing the great dragons while also engaging vast swatches of the metahuman population. Retaliation against metahumans seems to be happening in earnest now for crimes against dragon blood, with many dealers in dragon reagents either finding themselves actively hunted or ending up brutally murdered. Groups that work with dragon reagents such as talon clippings have found their supplies raided by faceless attackers. Shamans belonging to various magic groups and those following a wide variety of mentor spirits in recent weeks have begun to prophesize and share their visions of widespread bloodshed and destruction. Many of those visions involve Hestaby and Lofwyr in some fashion. Several media pundits in recent weeks have claimed that conflict between the great dragons is inevitable, and that there will be fallout for the rest of us should things continue on their present course.

As her shadow assets destroyed other key facilities for Saeder-Krupp in the Middle East during her campaign of retaliation, Hestaby made a personal appearance in Dubai and brazenly attacked the headquarters of S-K Middle East. Theories on ShadowSea have suggested that Hestaby was sending an important message back to Lofwyr, that she is more than willing to personally fight her own battles and not just to fight them through the use of surrogates (like assassins). Others speculated that the appearance was meant to serve as a reminder to us as well, showing that even though Hestaby may be championing the cause of metahumans, she remains a very powerful great dragon, one to be reckoned with and one deserving of the utmost respect. In every attack, she or her agents provided enough time for buildings to be evacuated, which prevented any serious casualties. During Hestaby's attack in Dubai, not only was she seen using spirits to keep people away from the building she was carving up with magic, which prevented widespread collateral damage once the building collapsed, but she also used her spirits to forcefully remove any security guards who were trying to defend the building. At the end, Hestaby took down the forty-seven-story building with only a handful of casualties, and more importantly, no fatalities. That fact alone has won her a tremendously loyal following within metahuman communities, cementing their belief that Hestaby is deeply committed to protecting metahumans and their interests. Her actions have left one question on many people's minds: What is Lofwyr's next move?

- That's not too difficult a question to answer. With Hestaby a sitting Prince in Tir Tairngire, Lofwyr is going to make it a priority to move the headquarters for his S-K North America division out of Portland and into the Tsimshian Protectorate (in Kitimat, to be precise). Interestingly enough, Saeder-Krupp has been buying up lands in Kitimat for nearly a year prior to Hestaby's speech. So it makes you wonder: What exactly did Lofwyr know that made him want to move his headquarters even before Hestaby started to shake things up? And how did he know it? Or was the sudden interest in Kitimat simply a stroke of extraordinary luck?
- Kay St. Irregular

- If I were Lofwyr, I wouldn't even think about moving the North American headquarters. I would keep it right where it is. If there's ever been a more basic rule to metahuman life than "keep your head down, shoot straight, conserve your ammo, and never deal with a dragon," it's "don't shit where you live." If Hestaby knows what's good for her, she won't start causing problems for Lofwyr and Saeder-Krupp inside the country that she helps to govern—especially now that her position is an elected one. After all, no matter how low profile her shadow activities might be, they could always come back and bite her on the hoop. So playing around in another part world, such as the Middle East, might be a very wise decision on the part of Hestaby.
- Pistons
- Word on the streets of Tir Tairngire is that there are three extremely wealthy elves (allegedly members of the Brat'mael, the elven supremacist group) looking to run against Hestaby in the next election. She does not appear to be in jeopardy of losing her seat at the moment. But if this conflict with Lofwyr and the other anti-metahuman dragons follows her back to Portland and the Tir, expect that to change quickly.
- Axis Mundi
- Not everyone is happy with what Hestaby has done. Humanis, as well as media outlets sympathetic to Humanis, is claiming that Hestaby used "dark" magic to get the building evacuated. They are saying that Hestaby and her followers used magic to take away certain managers' and executives' free will (those that had the authority to order an evacuation of the building) and "re-programmed" them to clear the high rise at the designated time. The bottom line of their story is the claim that Hestaby and her followers essentially mind-raped key Saeder-Krupp personnel in order to get their desired result. Many Humanis sympathizers are claiming that several of these workers will never be the same again due to the intrusion upon their mental faculties. Whether or not this is true is an open question, but it's something to keep in mind when you're thinking about what Hestaby might do to accomplish her objectives.
- Sunshine

Outside of the Tir, Hestaby has several interests that could be vulnerable to retaliation. The Shasta Shamans are perhaps the best known of Hestaby's allies. They have already been targeted by anti-Hestaby forces and have suffered losses, first from the assassination of their head shaman, and then again when their supply of talon clippings from Hestaby was stolen. The Shasta Shamans are close to three hundred people strong, and they boast members from a variety of shamanic traditions and national backgrounds. Hestaby also has strong allies in the Gypsies of the Californian Northern Crescent. This is a group of people of all races and metatypes who were, at one time, residents of Northern California until the Tir Peace Force upended their lives, seizing their properties and their valuable land. They now live at Mount Shasta with the great dragon's blessing. Recent estimates put the number of Gypsies as being anywhere from three hundred and fifty all the way up to five hundred people. It is believed that the Gypsies help protect and patrol the Mount Shasta grounds, keeping a close eye out for those who don't belong. The Gypsies are also believed to be a local intelligence gathering network for Hestaby, allowing her to keep up to date on current events in the area.

There have been rumors in the past that Hestaby maintained a small tribe of otaku near Mount Shasta, who were used to maintain the Shasta Matrix connections. The otaku tribe



J. Miracola

was believed to have been called the Clutch. It's been years since anyone has heard about this group, so no one knows for certain if they had all faded and lost their abilities, or whether some (or all) of them became full blown technomancers. If the Clutch still exists, it would be a valuable asset for Hestaby.

Perhaps one of Hestaby's greatest assets—one that might be a primary target for her enemies—is Mount Shasta itself. The redwood forest is Awakened. Over the years it has shown extraordinary growth (similar in nature to the Amazon rainforest), has become the native home of several species of paranormal animals (including the Shasta Deer), and is rumored to possess Awakened defenses that are capable of discouraging most outsiders from intruding deep into the forest. Mount Shasta pulses with magical energies and glows brightly on the astral as a power site. It is the envy of many magical groups around the world for the quality of telesma and reagents found in its woods. Should hostilities continue to flare, Hestaby's rivals will almost certainly contest her control of Mount Shasta to prevent her from using its power to fuel her ritual magic (a talent that Hestaby appears to be unsurpassed at, even by her fellow great dragons).

Hestaby also has a number of corporate relationships that could be of interest to her rivals. One of Hestaby's most interesting alliances is with the Draco Foundation. Hestaby has made many public appearances with the DF, *presenting* the impression that she enjoys a close relationship with the group. On multiple occasions over the years, Hestaby has visited the DF headquarters in DecCee, where she has met with members of the board to discuss various aspects of their active projects. In the T'ir under the Larry Zinkan administration, Hestaby has been actively advocating for allowing the DF to lead a research expedition to the restricted areas of Crater Lake. Despite these gestures, the DF seems reserved (almost to the point of being frigid) in its dealings with Hestaby. This tension mostly seems to originate over the Astral Space Preservation Society (ASPS). In 2057, Dunkelzahn's Will directed the DF and the DIMR to establish the ASPS and to oversee its work. But shortly after the ASPS opened its doors, Hestaby maneuvered her way into becoming the society's biggest patron—so much so that in a very short amount of time the ASPS gained its independence from both institutions. Today, it is considered one of Hestaby's crown jewels among her personal corporate assets, much to the dismay and disgust of those in the DF that her actions helped burn.

- The feud over the Astral Space Preservation Society isn't the only thing that has made the Draco Foundation's relations with Hestaby rather frosty. On the last occasion when Hestaby met with the Draco Foundation, the DF specifically requested a private and discreet audience. Instead, she showed up along with the rest of her media contingent. Hestaby's explanation was that somehow her schedule was leaked to the media and that she could not prevent the media from showing up. No one in the Draco Foundation bought that excuse, for no one seemed to be naive enough to believe that a great dragon could ever be that careless. The DF is still willing to work with Hestaby, obviously. To completely cut themselves off of a vast resource such as Hestaby would be foolhardy on their part. But rest assured there are many daggers behind those smiles now.

- Kay St. Irregular

- Looks like another example of Hestaby trying to portray something in a totally different light than what it really is. Big surprise. One has to wonder if there's anything genuine about Hestaby.
-

Since her Awakening, Hestaby has either been directly involved with or worked through the Shasta Shamans to support the United Talismongers Association (which has referred to her on more than one occasion as the organization's "honorary spokesdragon"), especially in their efforts to create "magical and nature preserves." There are at least four executives within the American Association for the Advancement of Thaumaturgy who are active members of the Shasta Shamans. Hestaby has also been donating two million nuyen a year to their organization since 2061, ensuring their friendship. A few years ago Hestaby donated another two million nuyen for the support of the late Dunkelzahn's John Timmons Memorial Fund, and has, on occasion, been seen at their fundraising events. Other small investments of Hestaby's have included Starfield Botanical Engineering, Harburgh Detox Labs, and Phoenix Biotechnologies. Many of these corporate investments, along with the projects that they work on, are tied into Hestaby's other great passion: protecting the environment.

Not only is Hestaby determined to support corporations whose agendas are to protect and repair the environment, she is also determined to put out of business those that violate environmental laws and disregard the sanctity of nature. Since the time she awoke and made her first public appearance, it is believed Hestaby has used her influence to infiltrate and gain control over nearly twenty-five AA- and A-level corporations. The corporations were then shut down, which kept them from ever harming the environment again. Unfortunately, Crash 2.0 and the skilled technical staff at Hestaby's erased any concrete evidence of her involvement in those business transactions. Should evidence ever be recovered implicating Hestaby in efforts to put hundreds of metahumans out of work, this could conceivably cause a scandal and a backlash for the dragon trying to portray herself as "the champion of metahumans."

- Not likely. Yes, the people who lost their jobs might be upset, but there are plenty of humans who share Hestaby's concern for nature and will see her efforts in a good light.
- Ecotope

In the past, Hestaby has also supported a number of eco groups, some of which could be considered eco-terrorists. These have included groups such as Save Our Seas, Sierra, Inc., Globalwatch, Earth Guard, and Terrafirst! Some rumors suggest that Hestaby's resources may have made their way to GreenWar, one of the extremist eco groups currently supporting Sirurg, as recently as one year ago. Should those rumors ever be confirmed, Hestaby's credibility in protecting metahumanity from Sirurg's aggression will most certainly be tarnished, as conspiracy theorists will run amok suggesting that Sirurg and Hestaby could actually be collaborating together, and that what Hestaby is doing may be a ruse for something bigger that Sirurg may have in store for Aztlan, and for the rest of the world.

- Given that Hestaby likes to interfere in corporate affairs, and that many of these groups are the same ones that Arthur Vogel associates with, what are the chances that Hestaby has come to some arrangement with Vogel? Could Vogel and Hestaby be responsible for some of the problems that Ares seems to be having these days to thwart some of Damien Knight's activities, in exchange for something that Hestaby wants in return? Perhaps a seat on the Ares board?
- Icarus
- It's always possible, I suppose. Another major Hestaby interest has been establishing relations with minority shareholders with all the megacorps, and making arrangements with them so that she could exercise their voting

rights by proxy. In the past, two known shareholders who have agreed to this arrangement with Hestaby has been Aikiro Tokunado and Louis Mendroit. Both of these shareholders were invested in Shiawase. Since that time, it is believed Hestaby has expanded her influence over at least a few minor shareholders in all the megacorporations that are publicly held. She might not have a whole lot of influence over the megacorps (for now), but she gets access—and information.

- Ethernaut
- Sounds a lot like how Lofwyr got his start with BMW.
- Snopes

HESTABY

B **A** **R** **S** **C** **I** **L** **W** **M** **Edg** **Ess** **Init** **IP**
 29 13 17 53 20 20 19 30 36 6 12 45 4

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 23/23

Armor (B/I): 20/20

Movement: 23/60 (45/90 Flight)

Reach: +2

Skills: Arcana 10, Assensing 10, Astral Combat 6, Conjuring skill group 10, Counterspelling (Combat spells) 16 (+2), Dodge 6, Enchanting 6, Exotic Ranged Weapon 8, Flight 8, Influence skill group 6, Intimidation 6, Perception 9, Ritual Spellcasting (Combat spells) 17 (+2), Spellcasting (Manipulation spells) 16 (+2), Unarmed Combat 7

Powers: Animal Control, Dragonspeech, Dual Natured, Elemental Attack (fire), Enhanced Senses (Enhanced Smell, Low-Light Vision, Wide-Band Hearing), Fear, Hardened Armor 20, Metahuman Form, Mystic Armor 20, Natural Weapon (Bite/Claws: 18P, -4), Noxious Breath, Sapience, Thermographic Vision, Twist Fate, Venom

Qualities: Home Ground (Mt. Shasta), Magician, Quick Healer

Knowledge skills: Draconic History 4, Dragon Society 6, Dragon Etiquette 5, Eco Groups 5, Image Crafting 6, Media 6, Metahuman Architecture 5, Metahuman Culture 5, Metahuman Customs 5, Metahuman Laws 7, Metahuman Magic Groups 5, Public Relations 7, Public Speaking 6, Reagents 7, Tír Tairngire Politics 6, English N, Gaelic 4, Japanese 4, Mandarin 3, Spanish 3, Speriethiel 6

Initiate Level: 30+

Metamagics: Absorption, anchoring, cleansing, extended masking, filtering, flexible signature flux, geomancy, great ritual, invoking, masking, psychometry, quickening, sensing, shielding, reflecting

Spells: Alter Memory, Analyze Magic, Analyze Truth, Armor, Aspected Mana Static, Ball Lightning, Camouflage, Chaotic World, Clean Air, Clean Earth, Clean Water, Control Pack, Control Thoughts, Death Touch, Demolish Durasteel, Demolish Plascrete, Detect Dragons, Detect Elves, Detect Enemies (Extended), Detect Individual, Earth Aura, Earth Wall, Fireball, Flamethrower, Hawkeye, Hibernate, Improved Invisibility, Influence, Lightning Bolt, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Manaball, Mass Sight Removal, Physical Barrier, Powerbolt, Powerball, Shape Durasteel, Shape Glass, Shape Plastacrete, Shattershield, Spirit Barrier, Translate, Water Aura, Water Wall, Wreck Durasteel

Spirits: 1 x Force 20 great form spirit of beasts (manifest as a wyvern), 5 x Force 15 plant spirits, 4 x Force 10 spirits of air, 5 x Force 15 spirits of earth, 5 x Force 15 spirits of water

LOFWYR

POSTED BY: WYRM WATCHER

VITAL STATS: LOFWYR

Age: Lofwyr in his metahuman form appears to be in his mid-50s. There is no definitive information on how old Lofwyr truly is, but it is likely he is well over 3,000 years old.

VITAL STATS: METAHUMAN FORM

Height: 1.83 m **Weight:** 86 kg
Hair: Steel Grey **Eyes:** Gold
Gender: Male **Race:** Human
Metatype: Great Western Dragon
Awakened: Yes

- I've known Wyrms Watcher for several years now. And many of you may have seen him or his posts on Shadowland or ShadowSea. He has become a leading shadow expert on dragons and dragonkind and has been studying dragons for almost as long as Snopes and Plan 9 have been studying their conspiracy theories. Wyrms Watcher posted the in-depth section for dragons in the Running Wild posting a while back. I've invited him here again to provide more specific information on the wyrm that we all love to hate: Lofwyr.
- Fastjack

Lofwyr is arguably the most prominent and high profile of the great dragons since the late Dunkelzahn. He rules over the largest corporation that has ever existed, one that easily rivals the size of any of the empires built by humans in recorded history, including Egypt, Persia, and Rome. Saeder-Krupp, under Lofwyr's governance, enjoys a prestige that is unsurpassed, even by the other megacorporations. Lofwyr, in many respects, is the modern-day incarnation of Caesar himself.

Saeder-Krupp's influence is pervasive and is felt in varying degrees by every nation around the world. Business dealings in Europe and in the Middle East are often made or broken by corporate suits speculating on just how the Saeder-Krupp CEO might respond to their proposed business transactions, even at the AA or A levels. Very few people believe that their business transactions, no matter how obscure or seemingly inconsequential to Saeder-Krupp, can escape the notice of the great dragon and his vast designs. Needless to say, conducting business in Lofwyr's backyard is best described as "precarious," as no one truly knows where (or when) their interests may conflict with those of the great dragon. To make matters even more complicated for corporations pursuing business opportunities in Europe, Lofwyr helped establish the economic organization known as the New European Economic Community (NEEC) in June 2063, and he and his AAA corporation hold tremendous political influence over that body. Many believe that the NEEC was originally established by Lofwyr to expand his political

power base throughout Europe, while effectively locking out much of his non-European competition. At one point, Lofwyr's political influence stretched as far as North America, where he sat as a Tír Tairngire Prince from 2036 until 2062, at the request of then-High Prince Lugh Surehand.

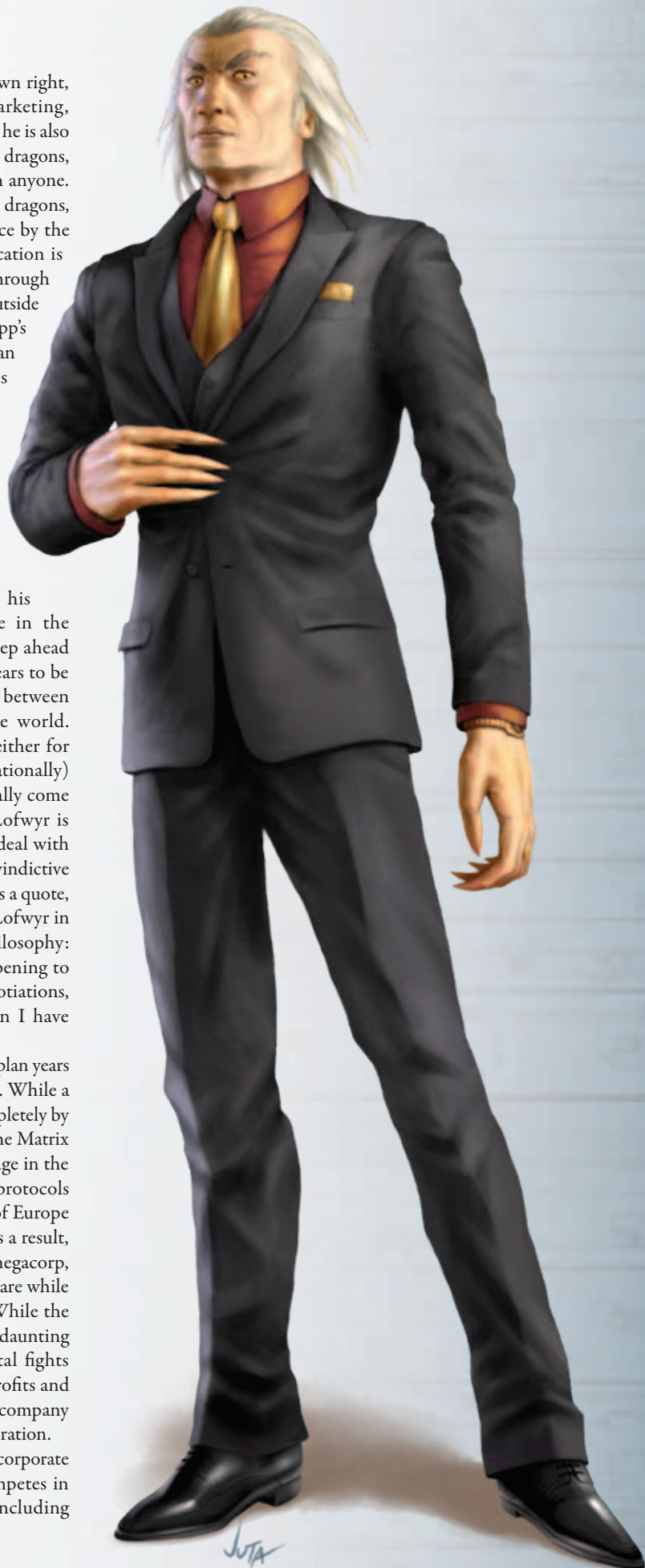
- Much of what Lofwyr did as a Prince is either still classified by the Tír's current government or has been (conveniently) lost due to the second Matrix Crash. It is rumored, however, that one of the reasons Lofwyr agreed to sit on the Council of Princes was to pursue certain vital interests that he had in the Tír. Rumors on Shadowland at the time suggested that Lofwyr may have had a lair inside the Tír, while others suggested that Lofwyr may have had a nest of eggs in the elven nation that he was protecting. But those rumors seem to be moot points now. If Lofwyr did have either a lair or eggs in the Tír, he most certainly would have cleared them out by the time he stepped down as a Tír Prince.
- Frosty
- Just because Lofwyr isn't a Tír Prince anymore doesn't mean that Ol' Golden Snout has ever stopped trying to expand his influence in North America. Saeder-Krupp North America has been seeing steady growth both in the NAN states and in the CAS ever since he resigned his position over a decade ago. And now, with the UCAS government becoming rather frigid toward Ares because of its recent missteps, it would seem as though Saeder-Krupp is stepping up its efforts to expand its reach into the UCAS, starting with the government contracts that would have been all but automatically snatched up by Ares only a decade ago. It would seem Lofwyr has his sights now set on Dunkelzahn's old stomping grounds of DeeCee.
- Kay St. Irregular
- Dunkelzahn would be rolling over in his grave at that mere thought. If he, you know, had a physical grave.
- Slamm-O!
- Wait a minute. There were rumors that Lofwyr had dragon eggs? So, it's possible there might be mini-Lofwyr's running around today? I remember rumors from long ago saying that eggs take about fifty years to mature, and since he's been awake for about sixty-one years now ... well, you do the math.
- Sticks
- I dunno. Why don't you ask him yourself? I'm sure he would be thrilled to tell you all about his family. While you're at it, why don't you ask him about that special relationship he seems to share with Ludmilla Reanka, the current head of S-K North America? I'm sure he'll be delighted to tell you all about that one too. Don't forget your flame-retardant armor.
- Slamm-O!
- Speaking of Ludmilla, ever since the tensions have risen between Lofwyr and Hestaby, there has been an increased number of threats being made against Ludmilla, mainly from groups who could be considered anti-dragon militants. In response, Lofwyr seems to have doubled the security around her, much to Ludmilla's seeming displeasure. It makes me wonder what kind of work would trickle down to the rest of us should any of these threats ever come to fruition.
- Frosty

Lofwyr's name is practically a brand in its own right, especially when it comes to the world of marketing, advertising, spin control, and public relations. Yet, he is also the most mysterious and enigmatic of all the great dragons, choosing not to share his long-term agenda with anyone. He is often a mystery even to his own fellow great dragons, many of whom are consistently kept at a distance by the great wyrm. In a world where global communication is vital, Lofwyr does not have a metahuman voice through which he can communicate with metahumanity outside of his corporate domain. Nearly all of Saeder-Krupp's media presence is handled through his metahuman employees in the Public Affairs division. This lack of a public persona, coupled with the few instances where Lofwyr has been seen violently brawling with other dragons in the skies above a few of the major European sprawls (generally crushing his opponents), has only reinforced the perception that Lofwyr is among the world's most powerful and feared great dragons.

Corporate executives, even within Saeder-Krupp itself, fear his ruthless business tactics, his aggressive nature, his commanding presence in the boardroom, and his ability to stay at least one step ahead of his competition and his enemies in what appears to be a carefully orchestrated chess game being waged between the great western dragon and the rest of the world. Shadowrunners cringe when they have to run either for or against Saeder-Krupp, terrified (probably irrationally) that at some point in their job they may eventually come face-to-face with the golden dragon himself. Lofwyr is among the main reasons why the axiom "never deal with a dragon" exists. He can be cold and calculating, vindictive and ill-tempered, and very rarely forgiving. There is a quote, probably apocryphal but supposedly uttered by Lofwyr in a board meeting, that perfectly captures his philosophy: "When I have finished crafting for myself an opening to advance my agenda, whether through direct negotiations, strong-arm tactics, or shrewd politicking, then I have already won."

The value of Lofwyr's ability to strategize and plan years or even decades ahead cannot be underestimated. While a majority of the megacorporations were taken completely by surprise by Deus' and Winternight's assaults on the Matrix in 2064, and as a result, suffered wide-scale damage in the Crash, Saeder-Krupp had the foresight to have protocols in place that allowed it to sever itself and most of Europe from the Matrix in the event of an emergency. As a result, Saeder-Krupp suffered the least damage of any megacorp, and it acted immediately to increase its market share while its rivals struggled to recover from the Crash. While the other megacorporations faced internal turmoil, daunting reconstruction efforts, and in some cases, brutal fights just to survive, Saeder-Krupp saw tremendous profits and thrived in the years following Crash 2.0, and the company easily maintained its edge as the world's top corporation.

Historically, Lofwyr's biggest and most bitter corporate rival has been Ares Macrotechnology. Ares competes in many of the same markets as Saeder-Krupp, including



arms, ammunition, heavy industry, and aerospace design. Nothing would please Lofwyr more than to see Damien Knight and Ares go down in flames. To that end, it is speculated that Lofwyr has begun hiring runners on a consistent basis to apply intense external pressure on Ares. If Matrix rumors are to be believed (and I'm sure Lofwyr does), Ares is already experiencing internal strife between Knight, Vogel, and Aurellius. In recent years, NeoNET has jumped up on Lofwyr's list of rivals, securing for itself a seat on the NEEC. For the last few years, Lofwyr and S-K have been clashing head-on with NeoNET through the NEEC, attempting to ensure that NeoNET cannot expand its influence in Europe.

- The person who may have known the most about Lofwyr's vindictive side was a woman named Wilhelmina (Mina) Graff-Beloit, the former President and CEO of BMW, who was unceremoniously deposed by the great wyrm back in 2037, when he had acquired an astounding sixty-three percent of BMW's stock through proxies, shell companies, and other back-room deals. Mina attempted to oppose Lofwyr, first by attempting to have him assassinated. When that failed, she began a campaign to sabotage the great dragon's interests. Lofwyr reportedly admired her for having the guts to stand up to him, but that didn't stop him from getting his revenge against her. He wiped her out, devastating her fortune and killing her contacts and anyone who was even remotely loyal to her. Some conspiracy theories even suggest that he might have also been responsible for the debilitating stroke she suffered onboard Zurich-Orbital at nearly the same time that he killed Nachtmeister. She didn't die for seven months, on January 25, 2063, no doubt sustained by sheer hatred.
- Fianchetto



- People need to remember that despite any PR bullshit, each and every great dragon is capable of being extremely vindictive and ill-tempered, and not just Lofwyr. Even the UCAS' most exalted late president, Dunkelzahn, who was praised to no end for being "metahuman-friendly," showed these same characteristics. In his will, Dunkelzahn stripped away all legal rights for a poor slot, and forced him to try and survive being hunted down by other parties looking to cash in on the sizable reward for his head for an entire week. No one knows if that guy ever survived, but it really doesn't matter. In the end, all great dragons are cold-blooded. It's their nature. Assuming or believing anything else is just believing in a lie.

-
- Another important thing to know about Lofwyr: he doesn't just stay in his corporate fortress, overseeing his vast empire from his durasteel castle. He likes to micromanage things as well. There are firsthand reports that say Lofwyr hires shadowrunners directly (which only adds to runners' apprehension that they could meet Lofwyr during their job for S-K). Rumors and stories shared over the Matrix have suggested that Lofwyr hires runners using the common "Hans Brackhaus" guise that S-K Johnsons seem to handle. He also has a few other identities and handles that he does not openly advertise. The last time Lofwyr is believed to have hired shadowrunners directly was approximately three months ago, when Hans Brackhaus hired runners to intercept intelligence reports between Horizon and Amazonia relating to the war. Lofwyr seems particularly interested in the activities of both metahuman and dragonkind alike in and around Bogotá. It would seem Lofwyr's interest in the city has only grown since the war has broken out. Makes you wonder what he might know about the area and what he thinks could be of value, doesn't it?
- Cosmo

Along with his brute strength, imposing presence, and extraordinary business savvy, Lofwyr is also a survivor. Lofwyr has survived numerous plots made against him since March 2012 when he awakened into the Sixth World. He has survived plots from well-connected metahumans as well as direct confrontations with other dragons. In 2012, Lofwyr sided with another dragon, Nebelherr, in his battle with Kaltenstein, and helped Nebelherr to defeat the more powerful great dragon. Lofwyr's motives for helping Nebelherr have never been revealed. A common assumption is that Lofwyr did so to make Nebelherr indebted to him. Rumors persist that Nebelherr continues to pay off that debt to Lofwyr, even sixty-one years later. On June 21, 2062, Lofwyr fought and killed another great dragon, Nachtmeister, over the Frankfurt sprawl. Over the years, Nachtmeister proved to be a serious thorn in Lofwyr's side, regularly interfering with Saeder-Krupp interests through the Frankfurt Bank Association. Following that fateful day, it is believed that Lofwyr succeeded in significantly weakening many of his European enemies by killing their strongest ally, and caused the Frankfurt Bank Association to lose much of its ability to safely oppose Saeder-Krupp interests. In those few, carefully chosen battles, Lofwyr clearly demonstrated that he was willing to physically confront other dragons, including his fellow great dragons, and has shown no willingness to back down from any challenge made against him or to his perceived superiority over others of his kind, and of course his superiority over metahumans.

A recent event, however, may have forced Lofwyr to reevaluate and change some of his long-term strategies, especially

when it involves his fellow great dragons. This recent event has fractured dragon loyalties, and it may lead to new relations and new alliances to be formed within the dragon culture. This division started when Hestaby addressed the UN in July 2073, warning the General Assembly of a rising animosity amongst the dragon community against metahumans. In that same speech, Hestaby condemned Sirurg for his atrocities committed against innocent metahumans in South and Latin America and then proceeded to support the United Nations' efforts to indict Sirurg on war crimes that he had committed during the Amazonia-Aztlan war. Up to that point in history, all the great dragons have acted as if they were all held to tradition to keep their disagreements and their feuds with other members of their kind private, and to treat each other with the utmost respect when seen in public by metahumanity. Dragons seemed to go out of their way to keep metahumans from getting too involved in their personal affairs with other dragons. But that all changed when Hestaby addressed the UN and revealed some of the dragons' true feelings toward metahumanity. Given Lofwyr's assumed high rank in dragon culture (he is believed to be Loremaster), Lofwyr may have felt it necessary to take action to put an immediate stop to the breaking of their sacred traditions and customs, if only to prevent other great dragons from breaking their silence and revealing a wealth of dark secrets about him.

Precisely one minute after Hestaby's speech, the leader of the Shasta Shamans was assassinated. A German-made sniper rifle was found at the scene, and speculation was rampant that Lofwyr ordered the hit. He has been publicly silent on the matter. Obviously, Hestaby believed the rumors, and a week later, Hestaby retaliated with a vengeance, destroying key assets of Lofwyr's in the Middle East, including the headquarters for Saeder-Krupp's Middle East division in Dubai. Rumors have been circulating that Masaru, a close supporter of Hestaby's, was seen near Mount Shasta following her speech, and that Rhonabwy has also sent some kind of message to Hestaby, affirming his support for her. To many, this looks as if a line dividing the dragons is being drawn.

All this seems to have put Lofwyr at a disadvantage for the first time since he Awakened. From Lofwyr's perspective, it might be one thing for the golden wyrm to be able to confront a single great dragon in combat, whether that is in physical combat or in other, more subtle avenues. But when you are dealing with at least three (and perhaps even more as time goes on) powerful great dragons, working as a unified front, no one, even one as clever or as powerful as Lofwyr, can survive on his own for a long period of time. Given his rocky relationship with almost all the other great dragons, Lofwyr appears to have felt a need to act quickly to prevent other great dragons from perceiving "blood in the water," choosing this opportunity to side with Hestaby and using their collective might to finally depose him.

- My pet theory about the assassination of Elliot Eyes-of-Wyrm: It was not Lofwyr, but rather Alamais, who arranged the assassination. For those who aren't familiar with Alamais, he is believed to be a blood sibling to Lofwyr. And unfortunately for Lofwyr, there doesn't seem to be anything more between him and Alamais than a very deep blood feud that can only end in the death of one or the other—I'd say Alamais, if I were a betting man. And I am.

When Alamais learned that Hestaby would be speaking out at the UN, he may have seen an opportunity to frame his "brother," knowing that most



people would automatically convict Lofwyr of the crime in their minds. This would set Hestaby up as being the one who might ultimately get rid of Lofwyr. And, if a dragon war breaks out, it would give the anti-metahuman dragons the opportunity to show metahumans the true might of the great dragons and to put us metahumans in our rightful places beneath their talons, something that Alamaïs has been actively promoting for years.

To add further support to my theory, from what I have heard over in the Allied German States, immediately following the assassination of Eliot Eyes-of-Wyrm, Lofwyr began a campaign using his shadow assets to bring down targets belonging to Alamaïs. During that week when we all knew Hestaby's retaliation would be coming, four major extremists belonging to groups supported by Alamaïs were caught by Interpol, and anywhere from twelve to thirty of their global terror cells were disrupted by Lone Star and other security services. From what I hear, this campaign against Alamaïs' interests is still being waged, even with Hestaby staring Lofwyr down. I should add that Lofwyr is quite outraged at being framed for this assassination.

- Sunshine
- It might not just be the dragons that sense the blood in the water. Ever since Hestaby's attacks against Saeder-Krupp in the Middle East and the disruption of S-K's operations there, various publications have claimed that Saeder-Krupp has dropped temporarily in the corporate rankings, going from No. 1 to No. 2, just below NeoNET. A vast majority of high-profile publications still have Saeder-Krupp listed as the world's largest corporation, but should a prolonged battle with Hestaby and any of her allies take place, Saeder-Krupp's title could be in serious jeopardy and could fall to NeoNET for the first time ever. I'm sure NeoNET will be busy behind the scenes "helping" Hestaby, if only to gain that coveted title for themselves, and all the media attention that comes with it.
- Dr. Spin
- Those "publications" saying NeoNET is the new No. 1 corporation aren't owned by NeoNET or its subsidiaries by any chance, are they?
- Snopes

To that end, Lofwyr seems in recent weeks to have extended olive branches toward both Ghostwalker and Lung. Most people might think that these two are odd choices for potential allies and that reaching out to them could be seen as a sign of desperation from the golden dragon, but there also appears to be reason behind Lofwyr's choices. Ghostwalker is no big supporter of metahumans, and never has been. His way of governing those who live in Denver could be compared to a medieval king ruling over his fiefdoms. He has limited their rights in the Front Range Free Zone while solidifying his own ability to rule over Denver. Many have called his heavy-handed tactics tyrannical. Despite showing a public loathing for Saeder-Krupp and Lofwyr over the years, there are mitigating factors that might be used by Lofwyr to manipulate Ghostwalker into believing that an alliance, no matter how temporary or tenuous, may be in his best interest.

Lofwyr could argue that it was metahumans and their careless use of summoning magic that shattered Zebulon, the Spirit of Denver, who (as recent rumors seem to suggest) shared an intimate relationship with Ghostwalker. And neither of those magicians allegedly belonged to Aztlan, so justice has yet to be carried out for that particular crime. On top of all that, Lofwyr has never been above playing to someone's emotions for his advantage. Second, it was metahumans who were responsible for tainting Denver with corrupted spirits and magic. It would not be difficult for Lofwyr to convince Ghostwalker that all the ills and troubles that his domain has suffered over the years have been at the hands of metahumans, and that this would be the ideal time to let go of any restraint he may have shown to the metahumans of Denver and to settle a long list of scores he still might have against metahumans. Lofwyr might point out that just because Aztlan had been kicked out of Denver (and is even now threatening to find another way back into the city via the PCC), that doesn't mean all the "wrong-doers" against Ghostwalker's interests in Denver have been found and punished. And with anti-dragon sentiment rising around the world, Ghostwalker may very well see an alliance as a necessary evil, one that could best serve long-term dragon interests.

- Keep in mind that Lofwyr knows how badly Ghostwalker wants to be rid of Aztlan (and by extension, Aztechnology). Lofwyr could pledge to help Ghostwalker achieve that objective sometime in the future, in exchange for his assistance with Hestaby and the other dragons now. With Lofwyr's resources, I'm sure an arrangement like that could be quite tempting for Ghostwalker; perhaps even irresistible.
- Frosty
- If some sort of gesture has been extended toward Denver, nothing dramatic has yet happened in response to it (e.g., a messenger's head being placed on a stake and mailed back to the Rhine-Ruhr Metroplex). So we can probably take that as a sign that Ghostwalker may, at the very least, be willing to listen to Lofwyr on this matter.
- Kay St. Irregular

It may also be difficult for many to believe that Lung would consider siding with Lofwyr in this potential conflict. For the most part, based on his public interactions with metahumans, Lung has enjoyed a good relationship with metahumans, and nothing suggests that Lung would agree to side with Lofwyr's camp, especially if that included trying to reassert dragon dominance over metahuman society and getting vengeance for the death of Dzitbalchén in 2064. Most believe that Lung sees Dzitbalchén's execution to be the work of Aztlan alone, and not the fault of all of metahumanity. However, many experts on Lung would argue that Hestaby's blatant disregard of several of the dragons' most sacred customs and traditions has likely made him a bitter enemy of Hestaby's. No one within dragon society seems to be more beholden to tradition and custom than Lung. And given that Lofwyr enjoys a high rank in dragon culture (and currently holds of the Jewel of Memory per Dunkelzahn's Will), it might be a simple matter for Lofwyr to forge an uneasy alliance with Lung, calling upon his services based on those very customs that Hestaby seems to have abandoned—and that many other dragons still religiously adhere to.

- The Jewel of Memory? I thought there was a story years ago where Alamais stole it from Lofwyr. Or am I mistaken?
- Ma'Fan
- Oh, there was. But given how obsessed Lofwyr reportedly was in first obtaining the artifact from the Draco Foundation when they were originally distributing Dunkelzahn's bequests, I'm sure Lofwyr would have spent a small fortune recovering it from Alamais. Plus, he has had over a decade to get it back. That's more than enough time for someone with as many resources at his disposal as Lofwyr to have recovered the jewel. To not have taken back the Jewel of Memory, especially when it was stolen by another great dragon, would only be seen as a sign of weakness on the part of Lofwyr. As everyone should at least suspect, that is something that Lofwyr would not tolerate.
- Frosty

For someone who seems to have few friends on his side, dragon or metahuman, Lofwyr still seems to be in a perfect position to either manipulate those around him into helping him or find ways of coercing them into service for him, and to allow him to survive and to further his ancient agenda. Once again, it comes back to the game of chess for Lofwyr, and who he can use as his pawns (willing or not).

LOFWYR

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	M	Init	IP
32	15	13	57	23	22	24	24	6	12	27	43	4

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 24/20

Armor (B/I): 20/20

Movement: 23/60 (45/90 Flight)

Reach: +2

Skills: Assensing 9, Arcana (Combat Spell Design) 6 (+2), Astral Combat 6, Con (Fast Talk) 7 (+2), Conjuring skill group 8, Dodge 6, Enchanting 6, Etiquette 6, Exotic Ranged Weapon 8, Flight 6, Instruction 5, Intimidation 6, Leadership (Persuasion) 9 (+2), Negotiation (Sense Motive) 9 (+2), Perception 9, Sorcery skill group 12, Unarmed Combat 7

Powers: Compulsion, Dragonspeech, Dual Natured, Elemental Attack (fire), Enhanced Senses (Enhanced Smell, Low-Light Vision, Wide-Band Hearing), Fear, Hardened Armor 20, Influence, Metahuman Form, Mystic Armor 20, Sapience, Thermographic Vision, Twist Fate, Natural Weapon (Bite/Claws: 20P, AP -6), Venom

Qualities: Magician, Quick Healer

Knowledge Skills: Ares 6, Aztechnology 5, Evo 4, Horizon 5, Mitsuhamas 4, NeoNET 6, Renraku 4, Shiawase 4, Wuxing 4, Dragon Society 6, Draconic History 8, Tír Tairngire Politics 5, Corporate Politics (Corporate Court) 6 (+2), Dragon Etiquette 6, Metahuman Psychology 5, Metahuman History 3, Public Speaking 6, Public Relations 6, Arabic 5, Chinese 6, Danish 4, English 6, French 5, German N, Italian 5, Japanese 6, Russian 5, Spanish 5

Initiate Level: 25+

Metamagics: Absorption, anchoring, cleansing, divining, extended masking, filtering, flexible signature, flux, geomancy, invoking, masking, quickening, shielding, reflecting

Spells: Analyze Truth, Armor, Ball Lightning, Blast, Clairvoyance, Combat Sense, Compel Truth, Confusion, Death Touch, Decontamination, Demolish Guns, Demolish Missiles, Detect Elves, Detect Enemies (Extended), Disrupt Weapon Focus, Fireball, Fire Wall, Firewater Aura, Flamethrower, Foreboding, Heal, Hibernate, Influence, Improved Invisibility, Lightning Bolt, Napalm Wall, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Mind Probe, Mob Mind, Mob Mood, Offensive Mana Barrier, Petrify, Physical Barrier, Powerbolt, Slay Elf, Slay Human, Slay Ork, Slay Troll, Spirit Zapper, Thought Recognition, Translate

Spirits: 1 x Force 15 great form spirit of fire, 4 x Force 12 guardian spirits (manifested as drakes), 5 x Force 10 spirits of air, 5 x Force 10 spirits of earth, 5 x Force 10 task spirits

LUGH SUREHAND

POSTED BY: FROSTY

Lugh Surehand was once one of the most powerful, influential, and important leaders of the modern world. As the first (self-created) High Prince of Tír Tairngire—and some would say the last and only real High Prince—he influenced the politics of power at an international level and shaped the fate of a nation. He was also a Machiavellian manipulator of the highest order, the kind of person to treat metahuman lives as pawns in his grand chess game. However significant Surehand might have been, his level of political power was so great as to make him largely irrelevant to the day-to-day business of freelance criminals (like everyone reading this). The High Prince simply didn't move in the circles that we move in.

Until he was deposed and forced into exile, that is.

When that happened, everything changed. Lugh Surehand became a free agent, with no responsibilities restraining him from pursuing his personal goals and agendas, armed with the full resources of the treasury that he had bled dry in his last days as the ruler of Tír Tairngire. Some might say he became the most dangerous man on the planet, certainly one of the top ten. More importantly, he stepped onto our playing field. He became a potential employer—and a potential target.

To understand the game that Surehand is playing now, you have to understand where he came from. The problem is, no one does. Lugh Surehand seems to have appeared from thin air in the year 2030. He has no known mother, father, or siblings, and the Surehand name itself is likely an alias created from whole cloth. Just five years after his first public appearance in 2035, Surehand declared the birth and independence of a new nation that he'd forged in what had been the southern part of the Salish-Shidhe Council lands. You might wonder what exactly Surehand spent those crucial five years doing. Unsurprisingly, he wasn't twiddling his thumbs.

- To add some background to this, it wasn't until 2029 that the Salish opened their borders to metahumans at all. Which makes Surehand's meteoric rise to power within the borders of that nation even more noteworthy.
- Traveler Jones
- A Cascade Crow man known as Walter Bright Water who sat on the Salish-Shidhe council was instrumental in convincing the Salish to accept metahumans, a decision they made around the time of his death in 2028. For a human, he had an uncanny resemblance to Ebran the Scribe.
- Man-Of-Many-Names

When Surehand emerged in 2030, he did not do so alone. With him were two of his closest friends and allies, Sean Laverty and Aithne Oakforest. Both of them appeared on the scene just as mysteriously as did Surehand, and each of them became one of the original Princes on the first Tír council.

- Mysteriously appeared? Really? The mass media never investigated their backgrounds at all? I just find this all hard to swallow. All of these guys were at least moderately famous. Are we supposed to believe that they never took an interview, wrote a biography, or did anything that explained what they were up to before 2030?
- Sunshine
- Spooky, isn't it?
- Haze

Oakforest and Laverty dove immediately into Salish-Shidhe politics, advocating reoccupation of the southern cities that had been abandoned during the strife and violence surrounding the Treaty of Denver. Their plan for a renaissance in southern Salish-Shidhe—a renaissance that would embrace a place for immigrants, especially metahumans—attracted many brilliant and like-minded individuals, especially scientists, technicians, and engineers. Surehand first appeared as one of the cheerleaders of this movement, and his memoir of this period of time, *The Promise*, had a place on bestseller lists for years. It was also instrumental in his election as the first mayor of Portland when that city became a part of the Salish nation. When Surehand took the mayoral seat in Portland, the first seeds of what would become Tír Tairngire had already been sown.

Over the next four years, the Portland area underwent a profound cultural renaissance, and the urban core attracted a population of nearly a million. Surehand, Oakforest, Laverty, and their inner circle of close confidants—all elves, as it happened—turned the city's infrastructure from a derelict ruin into a modern marvel. They also had the key support and backing of the portion of the Sinsereach elven tribe known as the Cénesté. As Surehand was secretly duplicating the city's communications network, creating a police force, and making other preparations, the Salish-Shidhe Council were kept in the dark about the goings-on in Portland by reports from Surehand's agents that omitted everything of importance.

When Lugh Surehand declared—by a pirate satellite broadcast of unprecedented sophistication—the independence of the newly created nation of Tír Tairngire, the “Land of Promise,” the Salish-Shidhe Council was completely blindsided. Surehand had already closed the borders of the Portland-Salem-Eugene area and prepared an army for war. The Salish-Shidhe military force that was scrambled to put down the secession in Tír Tairngire was decimated by the impressive arsenal of heavy artillery that Surehand had somehow stockpiled. The Salish, along with the rest of the NAN, had no choice but to recognize the legitimacy of Surehand's newly created nation. The Tír wasn't through proving its military might, however, and a surprisingly well-armed, well-trained, and Awakened force expanded southward under Surehand's orders, smashing the California National Guard out of Redding and taking a big bite of territory out of the northern end of CalFree.

- There's only one way Surehand could have gotten his hands on such a massive quantity of SOTA ordnance. He must have acquired it from corporate suppliers, although it's unlikely he would have the liquidity to purchase it outright. Since the nation of Tír Tairngire took a notably unfavorable view of corporate expansion and extraterritoriality, what was in it for whichever corporations supplied him is an open question.
- Mr. Bonds

When he created Tír Tairngire, Surehand also created for himself the rank of High Prince, with every intention of ruling as a dictator for life in all but name. Even as he elevated his allies Aithne Oakforest, Sean Lavery, and elven supremacist bitch Jenna Ni'Fairra to the council (along, eventually, with Ebran the Scribe), he ensured that the system of checks and balances in place would be one he could manipulate to remain in power indefinitely. Surehand did not merely create an infrastructure and a government, however. Along with his fellow princes, he created an elven culture that would play into Tír Tairngire's image as a magical place—clean, intellectual, affluent, lofty, and just plain *better* than everywhere else.

For decades, he played an extremely subtle political game to preserve and expand his influence on the Council of Princes. Gaining a reputation as an evenhanded centrist, a moderate, and a great compromiser, he mastered the byzantine intrigues of the system he created as he controlled the nation of Tír Tairngire at the highest level. During this time the economy flourished, with Seattle becoming the Tír's official port for its exported goods.

Surehand added more and more Princes to the council, careful to choose weak-willed sycophants and lackeys that he could easily manipulate, ensuring an ironclad majority. Many of these yes-men, however, later developed political ambitions of their own that superseded their loyalty to Surehand. One of them wound up being his successor, and another wound up being his greatest enemy; I'll discuss both below. Surehand also used his ability to appoint Princes to appease minorities within the Tír, appointing two dwarves, an ork (current Prince Larry Zincan), and a sasquatch to the Council.

It's said that you can judge a man by the quality of his opponents. This is very true—and we'll get to Surehand's current enemies shortly—but the same can be said for the quality of someone's patsies. Surehand supported the nomination of first Lofwyr and later Hestaby to the Tír Council of Princes, and in both cases the timing and execution served his interest. Axioms aside, Surehand is one individual who has dealt with dragons regularly, and not only survived, but come out on top.

- To be fair, Surehand had more than a few close calls, although they had nothing to do with dragons. The High Prince was targeted for assassination dozens of times during his tenure. Chimera, the Black Hand, Mossad, CIA, you name it. Surehand himself is said to have received personal combat training in a number of disciplines, most notably carromeleg. On one memorable attempt in 2047, a sniper's bullet, perfectly aimed, simply *stopped* in mid-air, hovering a few centimeters from Surehand's face.
- Thorn

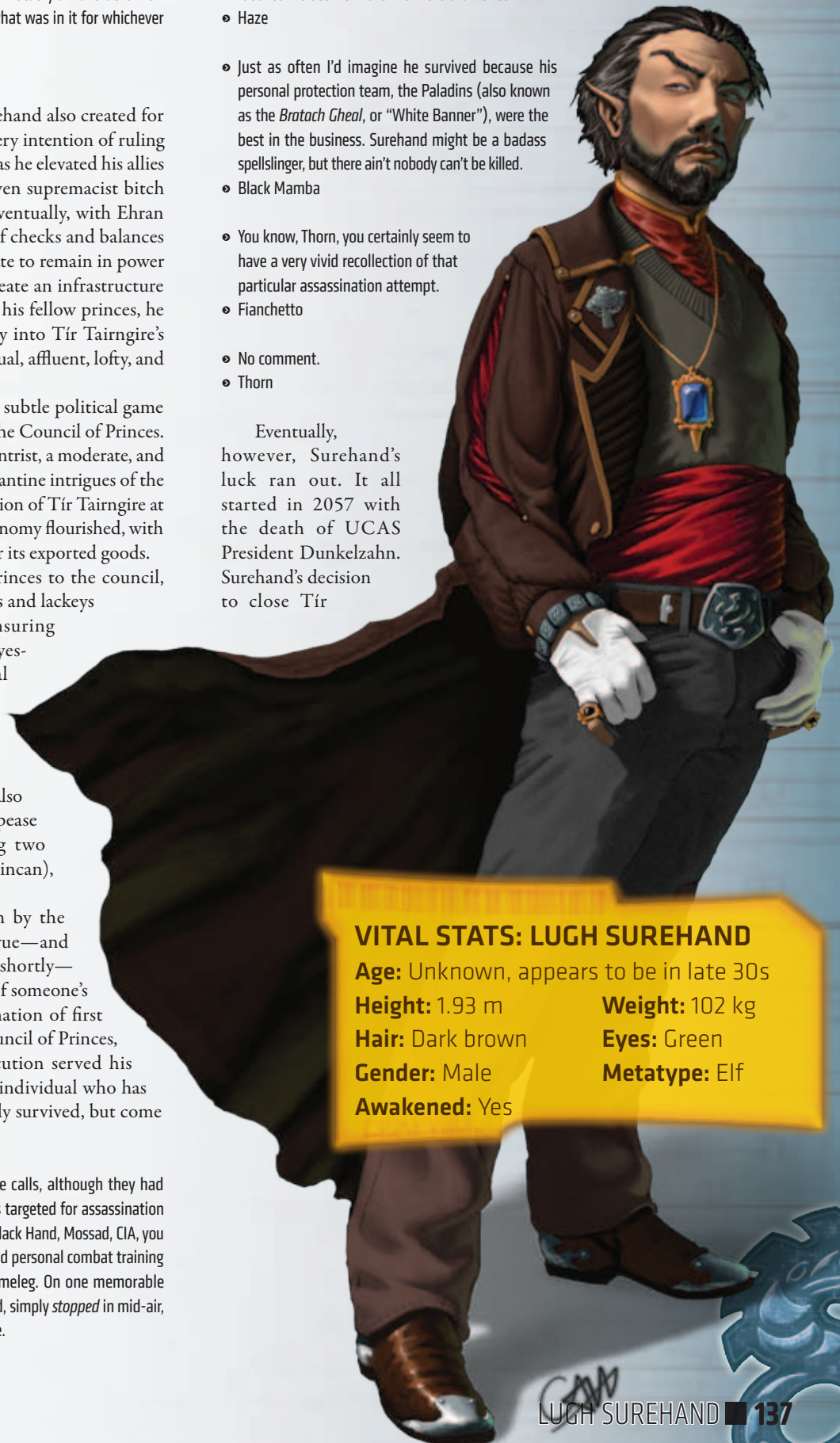
- Most likely an anchored defensive spell, although remember that this was before anchoring was even a public theory. It goes without saying that Surehand appears to be a hermetic magician of significant personal power. It saved his ass from the fire more than once.
- Haze

- Just as often I'd imagine he survived because his personal protection team, the Paladins (also known as the *Bratach Gheal*, or "White Banner"), were the best in the business. Surehand might be a badass spellslinger, but there ain't nobody can't be killed.
- Black Mamba

- You know, Thorn, you certainly seem to have a very vivid recollection of that particular assassination attempt.
- Fianchetto

- No comment.
- Thorn

Eventually, however, Surehand's luck ran out. It all started in 2057 with the death of UCAS President Dunkelzahn. Surehand's decision to close Tír



VITAL STATS: LUGH SUREHAND

Age: Unknown, appears to be in late 30s

Height: 1.93 m

Weight: 102 kg

Hair: Dark brown

Eyes: Green

Gender: Male

Metatype: Elf

Awakened: Yes

Tairngire's borders turned out to be disastrous for the economy. The direct damage was bad, but the economic pressure in the form of tariffs and trade restrictions levied on the Tír by its neighbors—like the Seattle metroplex—was worse. The Tír's bubble burst. Surehand and the other Princes did not bear the burden of the economic downturn out of their own pockets, but instead raised taxes, while simultaneously choosing to indefinitely postpone the Rite of Progression that made class mobility possible. Both of these actions created significant popular unrest.

The Rinelle ke'Tesrae ("Rebels of the Spire") were born. The movement demanded economic reform, an end to isolationism, welfare, and so on, rallying against the corruption and greed of Surehand and his inner circle. Surehand hit back hard, simultaneously making minor concessions (along with overtures and bribes) to the Rinelle members in the gentry while using ruthless counter-insurgency tactics against the dissidents from the lower classes. Surehand authorized police raids, summary executions, and the jailing of hundreds. Ultimately, however, the hardball tactics only fueled the fire of insurrection.

In the end, the center could not hold. In the chaos of the Second Crash, the Council of Princes was forced to step down in the face of mounting public pressure. Tír Tairngire became a democracy of sorts, ruled by a new Star Chamber of elected representatives and a democratically selected Prince, former token ork Larry Zincan. In his last hours in power, however, Surehand organized a cushy retirement plan for himself, draining massive amounts of funds from the already depleted national treasury and taking God knows what other liberties with his last moments in office.

Even if Zincan and the current government have all but pardoned Surehand, there are forces within the Tír still screaming for his blood. Some of the more extreme elements of Rinelle ke'Tesrae—still an enormously important political organization within the country—won't rest until all of the previous Princes are hunted down and killed. Others, such as the Black Sun, wish to purge Tír Tairngire of all "non-elven scum." While the present day Tír is a roiling sea of unrest and a morass of political infighting, Surehand and the other Princes continue to exert influence from a distance through loyal agents they have left in place as a contingency. But even while Surehand still controls some parts of the Tír government, other parts would see him prosecuted, or in extreme cases, dead. Surehand is technically a fugitive and has been pursued by Ghost commandoes since the fall of the Tír government in 2064.

- I happen to know that Surehand stopped in Seattle to complete some important business when he was chased out of the Tír during the events surrounding the second Crash. Some chummers of mine actually acted as a decoy team for him while he was leaving the city. No word on what that business could have been, though.
- Rigger X
- Word on the street is that Surehand still maintains one or more regular safe-houses in the elven ghetto of Tarislar in the Puyallup barrens. Supposedly, he has a lot of support from the locals there—which is fucked up, because he probably exiled many of them from the Tír himself—and it's rumored that he's being sheltered by either Laésa or the Ancients, depending on who you talk to.
- 2XL

- No one should make the mistake of thinking of Surehand as unprotected, or a soft target. He's not without his resources, and he took some of his most loyal Paladins with him when he resigned from the Council of Princes and left the Tír. While their ranks have gradually thinned due to the number of people hunting him—you can follow their corpses like a trail of breadcrumbs to see where Surehand has surfaced over the years—the few who are left are professional special operatives with decades of experience.
- Fianchetto

Besides the Rinelle ke'Tesrae extremists, Surehand made plenty of other enemies during his thirty years as the ruler of Tír Tairngire. One of the most noteworthy ones is Jonathon Reed, one of Surehand's fellow exiles. Jonathon Reed, born in Finland at the beginning of the Awakening, was appointed to the Council of Princes by Surehand himself in 2035. For more than three decades he loyally served Surehand in the Council, and served the Tír itself as the operations director of the shadowy Information Secretariat, an arch-spook reporting his intelligence directly to Surehand. At some point, for unknown reasons, their relationship soured. Although both men are now exiles from the Tír and technically international fugitives, it has not exactly been a bonding experience for them.

- That's a mild way of putting it. The two have been trying to kill each other for years now.
- Thorn
- Any idea why?
- Winterhawk
- There was some bad blood sown between them shortly before the revolution in the Tír. Apparently, Reed was harboring aspirations of taking on the High Prince for the throne, with some mysterious backers linked to the New Revolution fiasco in 2064. Meanwhile, before that could happen, Surehand and other members of the Council saw to it that Reed was humiliated and cast out in exile. You can't coup, so you're fired, was the basic message. This was done to teach him a lesson, both for his hubris and for some of the reprehensible things he did as the chief of the Tír's secret police. For Reed, this was a killing offense, and he's been gunning for Surehand ever since.
- Kay St. Irregular
- Surehand and Reed are both using their Paladins to go after a magical artifact called the Sextant of Worlds. Why exactly? Your guess is as good as mine, but mine would be that Surehand thinks it has enough magical power to pave the way for his return to rule in the Tír, and that Reed thinks that it's enough of a game-changer to let him take Surehand off the board for good.
- Elijah
- They're not, incidentally, the only ones looking for it. In fact, far from it.
- Frosty

In his ongoing shadow war with his former backer Reed—along with numerous other, better-concealed machinations that he's no doubt involved in—Surehand has a handful of trusted allies and advisors. One he lost recently was Reiner Graff, his long-time sidekick and a supporter on the Council. Unlike Surehand, Graff did not have his contingency plans well enough in order, and he was literally torn apart by an angry mob during the unrest in the Tír. Many of Surehand's Paladins suffered

similar fates throughout the past nine years, being betrayed, set upon, and eliminated. One by one, Surehand has discarded their lives to continue his own.

One exception is a man named Alexander Tintagel, a former Tír Ghost captain, who has survived and remained loyal to Surehand. Tintagel is Surehand's oathbound Paladin and acts as the former Prince's eyes and ears in the field. And, when necessary, his sword. Surehand and his Paladins—most of them also former Tír Ghosts—were set upon by another unit of Ghosts within sight of Seattle. They were attacked in spite of the fact that they were promised safety from retaliation if they swore never to return to the Tír. Besides Surehand himself, Tintagel was the only survivor of this massacre, which I think says something for the sheer tenacity of both men.

I can only speculate on this, but rumors in certain circles (flouncy mysterious elven circles) indicate that another unlikely connection that Surehand has made is Samantha Roth, the noted political/media personality (and former UCAS Defense Intelligence Agency Colonel). If Tintagel is Surehand's hand in the field, Roth seems to be acting as his voice, using speeches to attack the people and organizations

involved in Surehand's downfall. As is so often the case on JackPoint, I have no way of proving this, so take this particular factoid with as much salt as desired.

- Oh, that slitch. Those two fraggin' deserve each other.
- Bull
- Huh? Am I missing something here?
- Slamm-O!
- Probably falls into the "long and painful story" category, but it's worth mentioning that Roth publicly swore testimony that she was involved in undermining Surehand's government. If what Frosty is saying is true, it could have some interesting political ramifications.
- Kay St. Irregular

What Roth is getting in return is unclear, but it seems that she is yet another person for whom Surehand has acted as a sort of patron. Interestingly, most of Surehand's protégés seem to wind up betraying him in the end. Either that, or they wind up dead.

LUGH SUREHAND

B A R S C I L W M Edg Ess Init IP
5 7 (10) 6 5 8 (12) 6 7 6 (9) 16 (20) 6 6 12 (15) 1 (4)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11/11 (13)

Armor (B/I): 22/17

Skills: Anthropology 5, Arcana 6, Archery (Bows) 5 (+2), Armorer 4, Artisan 6, Assessing 6, Astral Combat 6, Athletics skill group 4, Blades (Swords) 5 (+2), Conjuring skill group 6, Dodge 6, Electronics skill group 3, Enchanting 6, Escape Artist 5, Firearms skill group 2, First Aid 4, Instruction 4, Influence skill group 6, Intimidation (Mental) 6 (+2), Locksmith 5, Medicine 4, Outdoors skill group 4, Perception 6, Philosophy 5, Pilot Aircraft 1, Pilot Ground Craft 3, Pilot Watercraft 3, Sorcery skill group 6, Stealth skill group 4, Throwing Weapons 5, Unarmed Combat (Carromeleg) 5 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Archaeology 5, Business 5, Classical Art 5, Classical Literature 5, Classical Music 5, Chemistry 4, Chess 5, Fine Cuisine 4, Gardening 4, Law 5, Literature 5, Linguistics 5, Magic Theory 6, Magical Threats 5, Parazology 5, Portland Area 6, Seattle Area 3, Tír na nÓg Politics 4, Tír Tairngire Corporations 5, Tír Tairngire High Society 6, Tír Tairngire Politics 6, Wines 4, English 6, French 5, German 5, Italian 5, Japanese 5, Sperethiel N

Qualities: Exceptional Attribute (Logic), Focused Concentration (Rating 2), Magician, Martial Arts (Carromeleg)

Initiate Grade: 10

Metamagics: Ally conjuration, anchoring, centering, cleansing, extended masking, great ritual, invoking, masking, quickening, shielding.

Spells: Alter Memory, Analyze Truth, Antidote, Area Thought Recognition, Armor, Astral Armor, Astral Window, Awaken, Bind, Blizzard, Clairaudience, Clairvoyance, Combat Sense, Control Actions, Control Thoughts, Cure Disease, Death Touch, Deflection, Detect Dragons, Detect Enemies (Extended), Detect Individual, Detect Magic (Extended), Dream, Frost, Hawkeye, Heal, Hose, Hot Potato, Ice Wall, Improved Invisibility, Increase Agility, Increase Charisma, Increase Logic,

Increase Reflexes, Increase Strength, Increase Willpower, Influence, Laser, Levitate, Light, Lightning Bolt, Lock, Manaball, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Mana Window, Mass Sight Removal, Mindlink, Mindnet, Mind Probe, Mob Mood, Nova, Nutrition, Offensive Mana Barrier, Petrify, Preserve, Phantasm, Physical Barrier, Physical Mask, Powerbolt, Resist Pain, Shapechange, Sight Removal, Silence, Slay Dragon, Slay Elf, Slay Human, Shattershield, Spatial Sense, Stabilize, Stealth, Stunball, Stunbolt, Translate, Tsunami

Bound Spirits: Spirit of air (Force 12, 5 services), spirit of earth (Force 12, 5 services), spirit of fire (Force 12, 5 services), spirit of water (Force 12, 5 services)

Gear: Cold iron bracer (Force 10 Combat Counterspelling Focus), contacts [Rating 3 w/ flare compensation, image link, and smartlink], Fairlight Caliban commlink [Response 5, Signal 5, Firewall 5, System 7 w/ Rating 7 IC (Analyze 7, Attack 7, Black Hammer 7, Encrypt 7, Track 7, Armor 7), and skinlink], 3 x fake SINS [Rating 6, each with Rating 6 fake concealed carry and spellcasting licenses, in different names], FFBA full suit, magical lodge (Force 16), matching orichalcum and onyx pinky rings [two sustaining foci (Force 10)], Mortimer of London greatcoat (w/ nonconductivity Rating 6), pewter brooch in the shape of an oak tree (Force 10 Manipulation Counterspelling Focus), sapphire amulet (Force 4 Power Focus), Spirit Binding Materials (Force 16)

Maneuvers: Evasion, Ground Fighting, Kick Attack, Watchful Guard.

Weapons:

Rapier [Reach 1, DV 5P, AP -1 (Force 7 Weapon Focus)]

Morissy Elite [Heavy pistol, DV 7P(f), AP 0, SA, RC 1, 7(c), w/ extended clip, personalized grip, smartgun, and armor-piercing flechette ammo]

Notes: Some of Lugh Surehand's indirect combat spells use the rules for alternate elemental effects (pp. 164-168, *Street Magic*). Surehand has the following spells quickened on himself at all times at Force 10 with maximum hits: Armor, Combat Sense, Increase Reflexes, Increase Agility, Increase Willpower, and Increase Charisma (this is reflected in his stats). Surehand has the following spells anchored: Deflection (Force 16 with 10 hits, triggered by any ranged attack on self), Heal (Force 16 with 10 hits, triggered by extensive physical damage on self), Oxygenate (Force 16 with 12 hits, triggered by the absence of breathable air). Finally, Lugh Surehand has at least 100 unspent karma free to use for anything he may need it for.

MARTIN DE VRIES

POSTED BY: HANNIBELLE

VITAL STATS: MARTIN DE VRIES

Age: 62 (appears in late 20s)

Height: 1.88 m **Weight:** 72 kg

Hair: Black **Eyes:** Hazel

Gender: Male **Metatype:** Human Vampire

Awakened: Yes (Hermetic mage)

Funny things happen on the way to the marketplace sometimes. Just ask Martin de Vries.

First, for those amongst you who are both historically challenged and totally out of touch with the modern world, allow me to make the introductions. Martin de Vries is the author of the best-selling Darrien Cross: Vampire Hunter novels. The four books in the series so far have sold in the neighborhood of fifty million copies worldwide. While the first novel, *Shadows at Noon*, has sold a mere six million copies or so, the last volume, *The Cold of the Sun*, just cleared sixteen million.

He's been out of the limelight for a while, but they're starting to crank up the publicity machine for the next Darrien Cross novel, *The House of Saint Béla*. We should expect to see his smiling face and his ever-present Saeder-Krupp Noir cigarettes a whole lot more over the next several weeks.

DARRIEN CROSS: VAMPIRE HUNTER NOVELS

Title	Published
<i>Shadows at Noon</i>	April 2063
<i>Mask of the Nosferatu</i>	October 2066
<i>Strangers on the Tide</i>	October 2068
<i>The Cold of the Sun</i>	October 2070
<i>The House of Saint Béla</i>	October 2073

- I love these books. The attention to detail is just incredible!
- /dev/grrl
- Really? I wouldn't have thought such hefty volumes would really be to your liking.
- Winterhawk

His publisher's official bio is a steaming pile of feces that's about as big as his ego (which, just for the record, is roughly the size of Australia), so here are a couple of facts you should probably know. He was born in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, on June 16, 2011. On the surface, he's an eccentric and strangely charming scholar, with an insightful grasp of conspiracy theories and the public fascination with the Infected. Under the veneer, though, he's a stone killer, mostly (though by no means exclusively) of the Infected.

You see, the books aren't wholly fiction; Martin de Vries is "Darrien Cross." He really is a professional vampire hunter, and has been for the best part of forty years.

Oh, yeah. Can't forget this part: He's also a vampire himself.

- Takes "Know your enemy" to a bit of an extreme, doesn't he?
- Slamm-0!
- He's not the only vampire hunter out there, of course, but he's easily one of the best. Over the last decade or so, he's also been instrumental in forming a loose organization of others in his line of work. No formal name, to my knowledge, but I've heard the occasional mention on the street of "the Guild."
- Stone
- That's the name of Darrien's support network in the books. Kind of puts *Mask of the Nosferatu* in a whole new light ...
- /dev/grrl

Some of you might remember him from when he first came to Shadowland's attention back in 2055, but the rest of us should flash back to 2057. That year was a pivotal moment in his career. Back in '57, de Vries was trying to publish *Shadows at Noon*, a scholarly tome about an alleged vampiric conspiracy to take over the world. He was having exactly zero luck getting anyone to even look at it.

- This was right in the middle of election fever in the UCAS, and there was some crazy stuff coming out. Considering the sheer amount of utterly lunatic material passing as nonfiction, his failure to find a publisher must have been enormously frustrating to de Vries, and probably reinforced his pre-existing paranoia.
- Dr. Spin

The problem, it seemed, was that he was an old-school academic type, and that's how he approached publishing, even in the modern world he inhabited. In academic publishing, if you piss off the wrong people, it's damn near impossible to get your work published, and Marty had pissed off a lot of people by the spring of 2057. A *lot* of people. You see, hard to believe as it might be from his almost charming (and nigh-ubiquitous) media appearances over the past few years, de Vries has the interpersonal skills of a megalodon with a couple of harpoons in its gills, and that charming personality had done nothing to

endear him to his former associates, the Ordo Maximus. Ordo is a hermetic social club that possesses the ridiculous amounts of money and influence necessary to exile someone from academic publishing.

- I had an uncle who taught at the University of Pennsylvania for close to thirty years. They really pushed the whole “publish or perish” thing, and if they wanted you to perish, they could find a way to make it happen. It started happening to de Vries a long time before he tried to publish *Shadows at Noon*, and I think that’s one of the reasons he hates the Ordo as much as he does. A minor reason in a very long list.
- FastJack
- Every great schism starts with a small rift. Martin couldn’t get a thesis published (and the Ordo has quashed at least two of his theses in the past), so his narcissistic, obsessive-compulsive little mind starts poking around, and he discovers his pet conspiracy theory. I’m not saying it’s the only thing that set him off about the Ordo, but it’s probably where it started.
- Fianchetto

More than just a drinking club for rich Britons with a possibly unhealthy interest in magic, the Ordo Maximus is one of the premier hermetic initiatory societies in Europe. Martin de Vries had just earned his Th.D. at Oxford and was a junior initiate on the rise. Then, in 2036, he suddenly wasn’t an initiate in the Ordo anymore; debate about the circumstances of his departure lingers to this day. This was the point where the Ordo Maximus became the Devil to de Vries, where he made the connection between them and his vampiric conspiracy. Years later, they were also allegedly the reason that *Shadows at Noon* never saw the light of day as a scholarly academic piece. They even managed to keep it off the radar when he tried self-publishing the thing in 2058, and that takes some pull.

- Or at least a large bankroll and some good deckers—both of which the Ordo could easily access. And when you consider some of the things the Ordo’s been implicated in over the last couple of years, de Vries might be right. In some ways, they really are the Devil.
The original version of *Shadows at Noon* is still out there, incidentally; interesting read, though I think I like the novelization better.
- Bull
- De Vries’ hatred for vampires started quite a bit earlier, before he got kicked out of the Ordo. About the time he stood for his Th.D., he married a young lady named Josephine. He has good taste; she was a very pretty girl. Things went bad, though, and she was Infected in about 2033. Rumor says that one of de Vries’ first kills, if not *the* first, was her. You don’t have to try very hard to think what something like that could do to your state of mind. At least I don’t.
- Winterhawk
- Add that to some already questionable mental tendencies, and it would certainly explain a great many things.
- Haze



By the spring of 2062, he'd given up on the book and had gone back to full-time vampire hunting, something he'd been doing for 25 years or so. So when he was approached by a man named Marshall Presnell, it came as a salve to an ego that definitely needed some attention. Presnell was a literary agent with a wide array of connections in the publishing industry, and he was also one of the few people who'd seen *Shadows at Noon*. He'd watched some of the machinations of the Ordo as they suppressed the book, and he decided that maybe there was something to de Vries' rants about the society.

A conspiracy buff in his own right, Presnell suggested a way to get the information into the public eye, a way that was beyond the Ordo's considerable reach: Rewrite it as an adventure yarn, thinly disguising the players involved and making the Ordo Maximus look even worse. He all but guaranteed de Vries that he could get the book published, since the Ordo's academic clout didn't reach into literary circles. When de Vries delivered the novel to Presnell several weeks later, the agent shopped the thing around. Not only did he sell it, he snagged a three-book deal and an advance of nearly a million nuyen. In April of 2063, Martin de Vries had a published novel.

By the end of that May, he had his first fan club.

As it turns out, adventure novels about a vampire hunter fighting a vast secret uber-conspiracy operating under the very noses of society with wits, magic, and a very sharp sword sell boatloads of copies. Who knew? Certainly not de Vries, who had expected the word to get out, but had not anticipated the fans, or the requests for interviews and such. While it was an open secret in the shadows, he didn't want the world at large knowing that he was a vampire, and he considered hiring an actor to make his appearances. Given his usual degree of people skills (which, to his credit, he had long ago acknowledged about himself), it seemed like a good plan. Presnell thought differently, though, and convinced him to simply play the "Eccentric Author" card.

That strategy paid off handsomely. He would schedule interviews only at night, or via the Matrix where he could control the conditions. The news outlets loved it, the fans ate it up—and de Vries, surprisingly, liked it too. The adulation stroked his ego, the money began rolling in, and the Vatican heaved a sigh of relief as the Ordo Maximus started taking some of the pressure off the Catholic Church as the new favorite target of conspiracy theorists everywhere.

- And this, of course, was right where de Vries wanted them. His public appearances always play up the vampire conspiracy angle, and since he couches everything he says in the guise of things that are happening to his beloved protagonist, he can really twist the knife. (It doesn't hurt that the public considers him to be borderline crazy anyway, so they expect him to act a little nuts.) And there's fuck-all that the Ordo Maximus can do about it—at least, not publicly.
- Thorn

- Mostly correct. They have a legal department, however, and they're not afraid to use it. There are several lawsuits against de Vries and his publisher currently pending. This is not the only front they're fighting on, though—a number of shadow ops have been staged against him over the past five or six years.
- Winterhawk
- It's amazing that some of the anti-vampire hysteria he stirs up flies as well as it does in the current atmosphere of "Infected rights" and all.
- Hard Exit
- Well, for all the hype the media gives it, the push for Infected rights is not as prevalent as they'd like us to think. Most recent polls show the rank-and-file populace is still firmly anti-Infected. Marty's hype feeds much more easily into the actual *zeitgeist* of the world, as opposed to the media's perception of it.
- Hannibelle

Watching the publicity appearances, it's easy to forget a lot of things about Martin. On the trid, he goes out of his way to look like an effete snob. This is camouflage, pure and simple; under those 5,000¥ suits is a body like coiled steel. He's spent decades training himself in some of the finest gyms and dojos in the world, and it's paid off. He fights well above his weight and can go *mano a mano* with vampires and wendigos and barely break a sweat. His martial prowess, in fact, makes it easy to forget that he's a hermetic mage of considerable talent and ability. On top of *that*, he's a vampire who knows how to use his abilities to full advantage.

- No shit. I had some recon drones out a couple years back, working a job in Chicago, and stumbled across de Vries dancing with a wendigo in an alley not far from the Shattergraves. Now, de Vries is a tall guy, but this wendigo was probably sixty centimeters or so taller than him, and twice as broad. They're circling each other, de Vries with a sword in his hand and the wendigo snarling, each of them occasionally gesturing at the other; I'm guessing they were tossing a lot of mojo around.

All of a sudden, de Vries does something that catches the wendigo short. Without missing a beat, de Vries charges the thing, moving faster than I would have expected. A lot faster—I had to review the surveillance footage I shot later to catch some of this shit. There's this one point where he launches himself into the air, straight at his opponent, and then proceeds to slice the hairy bastard in two, diagonally from right shoulder to left hip. He's cleaning his blade and lighting a smoke before all the dust has settled, looking none the worse for wear from what I could see.

I've seen people and things killed before, but never with the kind of non-chalance that de Vries showed that night. One of the freakiest damn things I've ever seen.

- Rigger X
- Dr. de Vries can make killing look very casual when he wants to. He likes to go one-on-one with his prey, but he's not stupid. He'll hire backup when the situation demands it. He pays well, and provides top-of-the-line gear when it's needed, but he demands the best and he doesn't suffer fools gladly. Or at all.
- Stone
- Personal experience there, Stone?
- Pistons

- Nah; I work with enough sociopaths as it is. Some friends and business associates, though, have taken a couple of those contracts in the recent past. The man's got more money than he knows what to do with, it seems, and he's not afraid to spend it.

He also gets around; over the past couple of years, there have been confirmed sightings in New York, Seattle, Houston, Glasgow, Minsk, Johannesburg, Kyoto ... and those are the places where he hasn't been making public appearances. One wonders when he gets the chance to sleep, let alone write his books.

- Stone

- He seems to be branching out a bit. He's always gone after HMHV Strain I with a vengeance, but while he had a lot of nasty things to say about Strain II and Strain III, he generally left those victims alone. That's started to change over the past six to eight months. He doesn't deal with them much himself; I guess even obsessive-compulsive sociopaths run into time-management issues eventually. A lot of these contracts he's been putting out lately are to deal with things like bandersnatch nests and such, as opposed to backing him up when he's hunting a nosferatu.

I haven't seen any evidence of him going after ghou communities, but if he's expanding into killing Jarka-Criscione victims as part of his new routine, it might just be a matter of time.

- Picador

MARTIN DE VRIES

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	8	8	5	5	7	5	7	13	7	206+3*	15	2

* See Notes

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/12

Armor (B/I): 6/2

Active Skills: Arcana (Power Focus Design) 5 (+2), Assensing (Astral Signatures) 6 (+2), Astral Combat (Weapon Foci) 5 (+2), Athletics skill group 3, Close Combat skill group 5, Computer (CommLinks) 4 (+2), Conjuring skill group 6, Data Search (News Indexes) 4 (+2), Dodge (Ranged Combat) 4 (+2), Enchanting (Artificing) 5 (+2), Firearms skill group 5, First Aid 4, Intimidation (Mental) 5 (+2), Negotiation (Diplomacy) 5 (+2), Perception (Hearing) 5 (+2), Pilot Ground Craft (Car) 3 (+2), Shadowing (Tailing) 6 (+2), Sorcery skill group 6, Tracking (Urban) 4 (+2)

Knowledge Skills: Astral Research 4, Biology (Vampirism) 6 (+2), Conspiracy Theories (Vampiric Conspiracies) 5 (+2), Design (Spell) 5, History 3, Law 3, Literature 3, Magic Knowledge 6, Magic Theory 6, Magic Trids 5, Parazoology (HMHV Expressions) 5 (+2), Psychology (Vampire) 6 (+2), Vampire Lore 6, Virology (HMHV) 5 (+2), Dutch N, English 5, French 3, German 6, Greek 4, Japanese 4, Latin 4, Russian 3

Qualities: Allergy (Sunlight, Moderate), Allergy (Wood, Severe), Dietary Requirement (Metahuman Blood), Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell), Essence Drain, Essence Loss, Fangs, Focused Concentration 2, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Induced Dormancy (Lack of Air), Infection, Magician (Hermetic), Mist Form, Regeneration, Thermographic Vision

Initiate Grade: 7

Metamagics: Absorption, centering, flexible signature, masking, reflecting, sensing, shielding

Gear: Eurocar Westwind 3K; fashionable clothing; form-fitting body armor (full-body suit); gold amulet of Pisces astrological symbol (Sustaining focus 2 for Oxygenate spell); gold wedding band (Power focus 4); jade statuette of four-armed demoness (Essence focus 4 (see Notes)); silver bullet (Sustaining focus 3 for Combat Sense spell); other appropriate gear as needed

Spells: Analyze Truth, Catalog, Clairaudience (Extended), Clairvoyance (Extended), Combat Sense, Death Touch, Detect Banshee, Detect Dzoo-noo-qua, Detect Goblin, Detect Individual, Detect Life, Detect Magic, Detect Nosferatu, Detect Vampire, Detect Wendigo, Fireball, Flamethrower, Foreboding, Lightning Bolt, Mana Barrier, Manaball, Manabolt, Mist, Oxygenate, Physical Barrier, Powerball, Powerbolt, Shadow, Slaughter Vampire, Slay Banshee, Slay Dzoo-noo-qua, Slay Goblin, Slay Nosferatu, Slay Vampire, Slay Wendigo, Stunball, Stunbolt

Weapons:

Colt Manhunter [Heavy pistol, DV 5P, AP -1, mode SA, RC 1, 16 (c), w/ biometric safety, integral laser sight, personalized grip]

Cougar Fine Longblade (Weapon Focus 4) [Blade, DV 5P, AP -1, Reach 0, w/ personalized grip]

HK MP-5 TX [Submachine gun, DV 5P, mode SA/BF/FA, RC 3, 20 (c), w/ biometric safety, gas-vent 2, integral laser sight, personalized grip]

Sword (Weapon Focus 4) [Blade, DV 6P, Reach 1, w/ personalized grip]

Notes: Martin de Vries carries a unique Essence focus that adds 4 to his current Essence score, enabling him to boost his Essence to 16. When his Essence reaches 4 (a natural zero), he does not die. Instead, he suffers cumulative penalties of -1 to his dice pool as his Essence continues to drop per normal rules. When his total Essence reaches zero (a natural -4), he must drain Essence per standard rules or die. He keeps this focus on his person at all times, and he will go to exceptional lengths to recover it should it be taken from him.



I AM LEGION

BY JAMES D. MEIERS AND RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN

Corinna stood in her office staring out the window as Majia Wright droned on through the speakerphone. Corinna maintained a small but impressive office between Eastern Market and the Capitol Hill Exclusion Zone, paid for by one of her ex-clients at Reality Inc.

“... DED and Tigersharks were pursuing them through Star Island when they just vanished,” Majia said.

“Well, your suspicions are correct. The director isn’t trying to burn you. It’s just a matter of long-term priorities, and it would be best to let it go. There are moves being made here, and I’m giving you the head’s up.” Graciously, Corinna didn’t mention that the last time Majia had pushed too hard, she had been dismissed from IDEA.

“Fine,” Majia replied. “If my people see them again, though, they are not giving any quarter.”

“I understand. Thank you for letting me make my case.”

“You’re welcome. Goodbye.”

The line went dead. Corinna turned around to sit down at the desk. One day someone would send a hard man or woman like Thorn to kill Majia Wright. It was a shame he was just passing through, because she could really use someone with his particular skill set. Instead, she would give another Nadja the task of putting the word out in the Miami runner community not to take jobs against Wright. The elf checked her schedule and headed out the door. Next stop: Judiciary

Square. She had to meet with the FedPol Corporate Security Coordinator.



Corinna crossed the plaza in front of the Federal Capitol Police Force headquarters, and no one looked at her. She was two meters tall, and she had one of the most famous faces on Earth, and no one around her cared. They were wrapped in their own bubbles of privacy, part of the DeeCee culture that kept people buried in their commlinks and ignorant of what is going on around them. The police and contract guards were no better. They were bombarded by rapidly appearing AR display information from every commlink in the area, so they quickly dismissed 99 percent of the readouts without giving the owners of the commlinks a glance. *Hooray for technology*, she thought, as she walked through the plaza and into the bunker-like building unnoticed.

Her destination was a corner office. The four windows were thirty-centimeter slits made of densiplast and covered with anti-projectile screening, but the limited view they provided was still better than most people here got. Captain Clarke’s office was a dead beige which he tried to hide by filling the room with mementos of his life and career. It currently served a double purpose as an office and a prison cell, a cell holding



someone who was a man of action before he sold out; a man whose nameplate out in the hall said Fire Strike.

She walked in and offered the captive a friendly smile. “It won’t be the same here without you, Frank. New York’s amazing, but what about the rest of us here?” She was quite serious about this. Since he was the liaison between the FedPols, corpcops, and all of the UCAS feds, he was a contact she did not want to lose.

“Well, that depends on me getting the job,” the ork said, and he leaned back in his chair so far his hair almost grazed the helicopter helmet sitting on a shelf behind him.

“Of course. I have some very good contacts up there,” she said, referring to Valeria, one of her “sisters.” “I’ll be honest and say that there are members of the MDC with their own candidates, and they’re all pushing hard. Luckily, that works in your favor because it splits the influence and will push the commissioner to find a third way so he doesn’t antagonize anyone too much.” Valeria had also put her in contact with Yankee, another Manhattan fixer, and he had done an amazing job gathering intelligence on the process and the decision makers.

“We can get you up there in a week, and you can make the rounds with NYPD and these MDC people. We want them to be on your side right now in order to avoid any problems down the line.”

“That’s great. That’s really good news.”

“Well, now that’s done, I have a request to make. I’d appreciate it if you could ask someone at Desert Storm about a certain gentleman from Yamatetsu Naval. That’ll get MIFD’s attention.” Corinna handed a small optical chip to the captain, who took it and then sat upright.

“Yamatetsu? Is this about, uh ...” Clarke limply waved his hand toward her face. Corinna grimaced slightly before scowling at the ork, and then she nodded. She didn’t actually care when people mentioned her life as a puppet, but when working with men like Clarke, it helped to sell the illusion that it bothered her. It made him feel like a white knight or something.

“Yeah, absolutely. I’ll call Montesinos right now.”

“Thank you,” she said. Corinna stood up and let herself out.



“Well, thank her again. The minister was being a real pain in my ass.” A trideo image of a woman who looked identical to Corinna was placed into Corinna’s view of Washington Circle as she looked down from the seventh-floor terrace of Powell Hall. The woman on the other end was Irina, one of the other Nadja Daviar look-alikes that formed their little fixers network. Irina worked in southern Europe. “She and the others are good people.”

“Of course. The *muñecas* owe me—owe us—for that deal last year when I had Global Sandstorm buy the freedom of a dozen puppet slaves in Palmar de Caridad last year. So your people shouldn’t have any more problems getting into Bogotá. Do remind them to drop by Silver’s and thank her. Then Marcos will get them into the conflict zone.”

“Excellent.” The overlay faded out, and Corinna finished her e-mail to Silver, the *muñeca* fixer. “Thank you for the assistance with the minister and the general. If you need anything, contact me any time.” As much as they shared in common, Corinna didn’t empathize much with the *muñecas*, especially compared to Irina and some of the others. Just because they

were all meat puppets-turned-fixers didn't make them a band of sisters to her. Corinna worked with the other Nadjas because the first one who rescued her made the DeeCee fixer the offer of a lifetime. The fixers in Caracas were business partners and occasional competitors. Corinna couldn't find it in her to care much about their anti-slavery agenda.

The elf's commlink pinged with an alert. Her contact had arrived. She moved her eyes off the menu bar in her AR visual display and focused on a series of e-mails that she had received while she was in her meeting. Corinna eyed them and promptly disposed of most of them, bouncing them to folders for referral or callbacks with a quick muscle twitch or pupil dilation. The benefits of total muscular and somatic control were many, but the most common use was navigating her electronic life without having to really move. Augmented Sign Language had caught on rapidly in the district, so it was common to see people flailing their arms about to various degrees while she was rocking a customized Ditko interface as she walked through the gate and down into the station.

I like meeting in the open. Outdoors, the elf thought to herself. It may be dangerous, but it's an acceptable risk; mostly, though, I love the feeling of being out in the world. It's so liberating compared to the confines of backroom dealing.

"Hello, Ms. Cee," a voice called behind her as she continued to gaze down at the statue of George Washington.

"I should throw you off this goddamn roof," she said matter-of-factly without raising or altering her voice, or appearing in any way to be angry. That was perhaps the most effective tactic—saying remarkably vicious things in a perfectly calm tone. She turned and faced the young man, a human of short, stocky proportions—the worst traits of being German-Irish. He recoiled in shock at her comment, coming as it did from an elf who looked like one of the over-privileged coeds on the George Washington University campus in her limited edition Toastycake-designed Bodyline suit and overpriced Armanté sunglasses.

"What the ..." the runner stammered, knowing she would kill him without a second thought.

"You expect me to do my job when you can't do yours? Is that it? Fuck it. Throw enough cash at the whore, and she'll do whatever we say." She continued, "Screw you. And your crew. And Zenith for putting me with you." She would never kill the albino street fixer, but this runner didn't need to know that. This was a reality check the fixer asked her to give the runner after multiple runs gone sideways.

"Look, we did exactly as we were told. What the hell?" he replied.

"You did your job, and what did you expect? Haven't you heard the saying, 'It's not a run until you've been screwed twice?' I know you have. So what am I supposed to do about it?" Corinna pushed past the runner and started walking toward the restaurant inside. She smiled at two orks in suits who had broken off from a cluster of similarly-dressed men and women and were passing by her. It was barely three in the

afternoon and this cluster of off-duty Secret Service agents were already on the hunt for college ass.

"Well ... We ... Uh, I mean, I ... I figured that ..."

"I'm getting a paella roll. What do you want? My treat."

This made the human stop sputtering a moment and do a double take before looking at her again.

"Uh ... I'm good. Well, we did find something else. Dexxy did, anyway."

"Is that so? And was that part of the job description?"

Corinna had changed her tone to concerned and almost caring.

"No, but it was ..."

"Do I look like your mother?" she asked, turning and staring the poor man down while the Moroccan behind the counter whipped together something that, decades ago, would have been considered a reinvention of the quintessential Spanish dish but that was now just fast food.

"What? No. I w—" He caught himself a second too late. Corinna would laugh if it wasn't about to cost him and his whole crew their lives.

"Fine. Fine. Now give me the data, and I'll make some arrangements." He slipped her an optical chip. She took it, and it disappeared somewhere into her skintight suit. "Listen to me. I don't want to have this conversation with you again." She had a hard edge to her tone. "Next time, be more careful when you and your friends decide to get creative."

The elf grabbed her sandwich and walked away, and both of them knew that they would never meet again. That was the price for her saving his stupid ass.



Being a Nadja Daviar "clone" made it impossible to make a move without at least a dozen interested parties noticing. She could go inconspicuous and change identities. This wasn't her real identity, and the longer she lived behind this face, the more she had to answer questions about why she was wearing it. Unlike some of the others (there were a few who had tried and managed with some success to reclaim their own lives, or at least something different than what was forced on them), Corinna knew intimately how fragile any identity could be. While the others preferred to move away from where they were found, and continued to move around and interchange identities, Corinna remained in Washington. She couldn't help it. She had been a spy, once; a Division Action officer for the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure*, the French secret service. Her current life was just an extension of the old one.

"You know that I have never attempted to use our past relationship to influence our current business," Corinna said as she leaned toward the dwarf in her immaculate blue Berwick suit. They sat in the back of his limo as it headed up Pennsylvania Avenue from the Hart Senate Office Building towards Farragut Square.

"I feel a 'but' coming on here, Cee."

“Never. What I am asking is that you look at the history of our business dealings and trust me.”

“Why Niccolo’s? Of all the damn places, can’t we let that one be?”

“Because I asked you for a favor.”

“I hate that goddamn Royer, and his old man. I will meet with him and this Telestrian shill, however, as a favor for you.”

The limo navigated traffic past the tenements along the north side of Massachusetts Avenue that Shiawase and Ares had constructed to house thousands of Compensation Army refugees after the 2055 riots, and which expanded after each subsequent riot in 2057, 2061, and 2064. Corinna was furiously communicating with some of her other fixers to curtail any problems that had arisen. In one instance, Mischa in L.A. was working to cover a job that got blown. She had facilitated the friendly extraction of some Caltech thaumaturgists to Manadyne’s offices in Boston. The magical research community being as small as it is, word got out, and then Pueblo got angry. Contract Court jurisprudence had long afforded the Pueblo Corporate Council the same right of repatriation of fugitive citizens as other megacorps. Corinna and Sofia, who was their best fixer when it came to all things Matrix, were delaying the court clerk’s actions long enough for Corinna to broker a compensation package between Manadyne and PCC. The whole deal now depended on Wuxing’s Jonathan Blake, who was acting as the impartial middleman and who also had the resources of Wuxing Financial to pay the Pueblos without Manadyne’s fingerprints being noticed.

When they reached 17th, passing a long-established restaurant, Corinna hopped out of the limo. She walked around to a car waiting in the valet area that would deliver her separately from Senator Tillman, who was going to arrive once Corinna had already been inside with Senator Royer.

Niccolo’s was a classic power restaurant located just north of the White House. When Corinna entered, she could feel the eyes of many of the regulars—lobbyists, career appointees, and veteran politicians—on her as she headed toward the table in the back where Senator Royer was waiting with Steve Atkins, his chief of staff, and Moire Hale, Telestrian’s chief lobbyist. She could see and sense the sideways glances, the leering, the eye-rolling of other patrons who didn’t quite appreciate this living visage of someone many of them knew or admired, or in some cases despised, coming to dine and do business with other powerful men and women like themselves. Corinna sat next to Atkins and greeted everyone at the table.

As she waited for Senator Tillman, a newsfeed carried a listing of gossip and information on DeeCee to the display in her wire-framed glasses. People were already noticing her with the senator and the lobbyist. More important to her at the moment, though, was a chat request from Natalia in Seattle.

“Hello.” Natalia was far and away the most bloodless of the Nadjas, which intrigued Corinna for many reasons. “My special accountant friend has made arrangements for you through his contacts in NeoNET. Your client has twenty-four hours access

to the National Technical Center, and not one second longer.”

“Excellent.” Corinna typed into the chat window surreptitiously under the table. “That will provide more than enough time.”

“Good. That request now has me indebted to Tess. I don’t like being indebted to anyone at MCT.”

“I understand. Doesn’t that make you even with NeoNET? Never mind. I’ll see what I can do to offset that as quickly as possible.” Chat ended. Suddenly a new window appeared. Yelena, the first Nadja.

“There isn’t enough intrigue there that you have to dive into Seattle’s shadows, too?” *Fuck*, Corinna cursed to herself. She then cursed Sofia, who she was certain had let Yelena access her conversations with Natalia.

“Just local business, but I was on short notice. What’s up?”

“I am making you responsible for this one, which may save Natalia’s life. There’s a hacker-fixer out there, Hannibelle. She’s been making bolder moves against Natalia’s side business, and it would be in her best interest if she lay low for a while. People are starting to put the pieces together that she’s involved in that business, and that’s not good for any of us. I’ll be damned if I let one of you get killed for being stupid.”

“I’ll take care of it,” she said a voice just above a whisper, but still loud enough for those nearby to notice.

“What’s that?” Atkins asked.

“Nothing.” She turned and watched Senator Tillman walk up to the table. She smiled as he approached—it was false, but she hoped it was convincing. He went around the table so that she sat last. As she leaned in, he whispered to her.

“I just got yelled at by the president for meeting with these two. It better be worth it,” he said with such intensity that a fleck of spit landed on her earlobe. She just leaned back and smiled.



It was almost 1:00 a.m. when Corinna finally got home to the quiet house in Friendship Heights, just inside the city limits between Washington and Chevy Chase in Montgomery County. She slipped in through the back door and grabbed a bottle of Sylvan Mist, the insanely expensive, magically filtered Tír Tairngire bottled water from the refrigerator. Sitting down at the kitchen table, she popped the top with one hand while she let her hair down with the other. She heard her husband’s footsteps padding down the stairs before the lean, black ork wearing a Fletcher School t-shirt came around the corner into the kitchen.

“Hey, honey. How was your day?” he asked as he walked over to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of the Tír water for himself.

“Oh, you know, the usual,” she said with a smile as he leaned down and kissed her. He was the one person who she didn’t have to constantly entreat, flatter, or otherwise manipulate, and that was probably the only thing that kept her sane.

NADJA DAVIAR

POSTED BY: FASTJACK

VITAL STATS: NADJA DAVIAR

Age: 59 **Height:** 2.0 m
Weight: 85 kg **Hair:** Black
Eyes: Green **Gender:** Female
Race: Caucasian **Metatype:** Elf
Awakened: Yes (Adept)

I received this rather interesting dossier following the re-emergence of Nadja Daviar, and I thought it was an excellent addition to the rundown of compelling characters that I've been assembling. The source has an agenda (as you'll see), but they also have a close and rather unique perspective on a very interesting personality who has apparently taken a keen interest in the shadows since her return. The briefing also provides useful information that bears sharing even if you never have direct dealings with Daviar or her sphere of influence.

// upload e-mail :: user FastJack :: 08/25/73 //

Subject: Nadja Daviar

After vanishing for nearly nine years, Nadja Daviar was presumed dead, or at least believed not to be coming back. At the time of her disappearance in 2064, she was widely considered the most powerful and influential woman on Earth. After serving as the personal translator and assistant to the great dragon Dunkelzahn, she effectively became his successor as UCAS president after his assassination. She administered his estate, executed his final wishes and bequests, and carried out a political and social legacy as vice president of the UCAS for seven years. One specific legacy, ownership of Gavilan Ventures and its stock in Ares Macrotechnology, further enhanced her presence within the corporate domain.

Her mysterious re-emergence comes at a chaotic time for the Draco Foundation. The foundation's acting chair, Aina Dupree, was discovered dead on July 18 in the rubble of the Watergate Bunker. The next day the remaining trustees decided that permanent action had to be taken in light of this development and proposed to meet in Washington, D.C., two weeks from the date of Dupree's death. In her role of acting chair, Dupree was an intense micromanager, and in her absence the largest tax-exempt organization in history was without legal or administrative direction. Three days after Dupree's death, Draco Foundation lawyers filed for reinstatement of SIN 8S3K-3U1R-HF45—Nadja Simyonova Daviar—without public comment. In the time since, Daviar herself has made only one comment to the public indicating her intent to “make up for lost time.”

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Nadja Daviar was born in Tallinn, Estonia, on March 19, 2014, the only child of a family that effectively ceased to exist when she was eight years old. Her parents were killed during a riot in the capital, provoked by the arrival of a second strain of VITAS in the uneasy aftermath of Goblinization. That she survived is a feat itself. Officially she was remanded to a state orphanage, but all current research indicates that she was a “paper” resident who effectively raised herself in a city that was at best indifferent to its UGE-“stricken” children.

- There are people who tried every imaginable (and some almost inconceivable) methods to track down legal relatives, especially after she disappeared. The foundation managed a remarkable feat in keeping her from being declared dead while Dupree held power of attorney over her affairs.
- Kay St. Irregular

Daviar exhibited, and continues to demonstrate to this day, significantly higher-than-average cognitive functions. Speculation existed up to the time of her disappearance of possible magical potential, especially since research from the mid-2060s described the possible existence of latent Awakened abilities previously unknown to most of the world; abilities that affect cognitive and social/behavioral functions, both of which Daviar was already considered to have mastered. Advanced testing on these abilities is ongoing.

In her most difficult days, Daviar's motivation was simple: survival. The world seemed to be coming to an end, and a third of the people she was likely to encounter wouldn't survive this period. She decided to escape. In the process of educating herself on her world she found allies, mostly elves like herself, who also shared an ambition beyond making their next meal. One of those friends and mentors was a young Finn named Jonathon Reed. He showed her how valuable her skills were, even as a teenager, to those whose ruthlessness, idealism, or insanity exceeded the fear around them.

- My new hero. It's a shame neither she nor Dunkelzahn ever tried to play up this aspect of her background. Then again, it doesn't do much when the job was to be a pretty face.
- /dev/grll

Officially, she left the orphanage in 2030, or so it was written in the hastily scribbled handwriting of a clerk evacuating Tallinn ahead of the Russian invasion. The reality is that she and Reed were among the many who tried, and even fewer who succeeded, to exploit the shadows and black/grey markets created during the EuroWars. With her charisma and physical attractiveness, she could easily pursue a career relying on those assets. But that is not, and never has been, who Daviar is.

- Being able to navigate and manage the complex logistics of wartime black markets could have made Nadja even more powerful than she was. She seemed intent on doing some good, which prevented her from rising to power as quickly as more ruthless profiteers like Inazo Aneki.
- Fianchetto
- Aneki is now dead, and Daviar is quite alive. What does that say?
- Netcat

This business can be lucrative, and Daviar kept detailed track of her finances. As the wars wound down and order was re-established, there was a growing need to account for the influx of money. The answer was to create a complex money-laundering operation that funneled the clean resources into a small corporation that she felt safe in letting run its own course so long as it protected her investment. That corporation was Reality Inc.

- What. The. Fuck. How did you not tell us, FastJack?
- Mr. Bonds
- Just because we've been around doesn't mean we know, or share, everything.
- Thorn

The resources she earned went to various outlets—charitable, social, commercial, and political—as she exploited her knowledge and connections to make her reputation in postwar Europe. Her meeting with Dunkelzahn in 2039 at an Adam Aloné exhibit in Paris was the turning point, an opportunity to do something globally important. She moved to Lake Louise and quickly took over the dragon's empire. Or so she thought.

Running Dunkelzahn's presidential campaign exhibited to the world Daviar's organizational and leadership skills. His death, however, was the ultimate test in running a shadow empire that only he knew about. The additional onus of being the UCAS vice president, one who wielded power and influence with the president and his own circle, and a major shareholder-director of Ares during the 2059-61 corporate war added to those duties. Her late benefactor and friend had provided a series of roadmaps, but suspiciously none of them saw past 2064. By then, she had cemented her role as a diplomat in defusing Ghostwalker's arrival and establishing the power-sharing arrangement in Denver, running the successful Haeffner/Daviar '60 presidential campaign, expanding the scope and breadth of the Draco Foundation's missions, and developing an important role within Ares.

Then the world nearly came to the end, again, and she disappeared.





DAVIAR'S HOLDINGS

The return of Nadja Daviar presents obstacles. Legally, she is alive and well. There will continue to be challenges to claims of her existence, and people will try to take permanent possession of pieces of her empire that they managed in her absence, but that is the price she has to pay for the actions she took in the last decade. Her foremost, but not only, concern is her empire.

DRACO FOUNDATION

To Nadja Daviar ... I leave the bulk of my estate, save for those items named in this will.

After his death President Dunkelzahn famously bequeathed a large horde of objects to people of all stations from around the world. Everything else went to Daviar, and not the Draco Foundation. The Draco Foundation exists to carry out his wishes as an extension of Daviar's role as executor, and that included ensuring her assets were controlled. The sudden events of Dunkelzahn's death and the investigation prompted her to place her assets into a trust overseen by the foundation. It was not only an effort to maintain an ethical stature beyond reproach, but also an opportunity to create a tax shelter. The current board of trustees recognizes Daviar as the assignee under the will, and their role is to ensure she receives the bequest Dunkelzahn made to her.

There are individuals within the foundation who have come to appreciate the gravity of the current situation, but the staff is in conflict. Some are hopeful, and some see this acknowledgement of the law as a betrayal of Dunkelzahn. The foundation has a clear purpose outlined in its founding document and Dunkelzahn's own will. People know what the estate's resources are being used to accomplish. But if she just snatches them up for her personal use, then a lot of people who've come to rely on the foundation as a benefactor for positive social change fear that once gutted it would be rendered powerless. They take solace, or conspire, to ensure that even if she were to unravel every asset, it would take time, lawyers, and a significant amount of that same estate. It is a disservice to his legacy, however, to pretend that this is not how the world and her estate exist.

The Draco Foundation had already lost its chair and vice chair before Daviar returned. When the full board met on August 1, she was reaffirmed as the chair while Frank Hardy was elected vice chair. They then accepted the resignations of trustees Midori Kanematsu and Miguel Torres. While Ms. Kanematsu proved a valuable asset in managing the vast financial empire, the system she put into place was worth more than her continued personal involvement. The remaining members formed a new executive board under FDC and IRS law and regulations, and Chairwoman Daviar announced that former presidents Betty Jo Pritchard (UCAS) and Ivory McCabe (CAS) would chair the search process for three new voting members, as well as members to form an advisory board.

- Kanematsu and Dupree brought a harder edge to the DF after Daviar disappeared, recruiting some pretty nasty hardliners from the Japanese empire who didn't fall into line with Emperor Yasuhiro. It seems Daviar did not approve.
- Mihoshi Oni

Internally, the foundation is a large corporation. It has dozens of offices and programs scattered across the globe, and it maintains liaison relationships with everyone from the Dunkelzahn Institute of Magical Research to the United Nations. When they last saw Daviar, most foundation employees knew that she had little to do with day-to-day management and operations, which contrasted with Acting Chair Dupree's subsequent management style. Now that Daviar has returned, she has indicated a desire to diversify and delegate management control. She's already brought on Rex Coll as the new executive director, and many branch and managerial-level employees are expecting to have to defend their jobs.

- Sexy Remy is a beast of a man in every sense of the word. After some corporate raider pulls off a leveraged buyout, they bring him in to gut the new acquisition so his bosses get to feast on the bits they actually wanted while the rest of the corp holds that debt as it gets scuttled.
- Cosmo

Over the years, the foundation has made itself a haven for the few drakes that have appeared across the world, mentoring and protecting them. Ryan Mercury, a drake himself, currently oversees this program with his lieutenant and current significant other, an eastern drake named Azadeh. Mercury and Daviar share a long past within Dunkelzahn's employ, and he made some tough decisions after Daviar disappeared. He spent years searching for her across the globe, until one day he returned to Lake Louise with the understanding that he had to be the drakes' leader and mentor. Given his past relationship with Daviar, he has thrown his full support behind her. Their relationship isn't without conflicts, but these are mostly kept private.

REALITY INC.

Reality Inc. was established before the first Crash as a holding company for Daviar's various assets, which were managed through an impressive money-laundering system. It became a full-fledged business operation as Daviar delegated more and more control in its direction due to the fact that her role serving Dunkelzahn placed increasing demands on her time. There has been a lot of focus on Reality's security-related acquisitions like Eagle Security and Cavalier Arms, but the pool of nuyen that Reality Inc. has drawn from for those purchases is part of their unacknowledged assets. Since her return, Daviar has met with the corporate leadership twice and seems to approve of their actions as she consolidates and reorganizes the web of assets.

Damien Knight is already in a precarious place as far as Ares is concerned, and when Daviar returned it probably shaved some years off his life that he can't afford to lose. Daviar owns Gavilan Ventures outright, but its leadership and proxy representative to the Ares board, Nicholas Aurelius, has been controlled by other people for years. The most important long-term concern for Gavilan is determining its value, its use, and its future operations beyond the shares it owns in Ares. It could be incorporated into Reality, or some other fate may be in store.

- For those of you keeping score at home, Nadja now owns a stake in Lone Star, Eagle Security, and Knight Errant. Those are the corporations that patrol three of Denver's four sectors.
- Kay St. Irregular
- Let's back this up a bit. Despite its assets, the DF will never be an extraterrestrial megacorp because of how it was incorporated. Recent events have proven that Reality Inc. has no such problem. Howard Hughes proved how stupid the idea of using a tax-exempt organization as a holding corporation was over a century ago, and that was long before the Business Recognition Accords. Daviar is much better off positioning the foundation as a subsidiary of Reality Inc.—if she can fend off the lawyers, politicians, corporations, and everyone else with an interest in stopping her, that is.
- Mr. Bonds

GHOSTWALKER

When Ghostwalker emerged from the DeeCee Rift in 2061, Daviar was instrumental in negotiating his takeover of Denver. She helped the dragon understand the political situation on the continent and within Denver, and she held discussions with him about continuing Dunkelzahn's legacy. Both were intent on pursuing that goal, but over time there have been marked differences in how each has sought to fulfill Dunkelzahn's legacy, especially in how Ghostwalker has manipulated people and events toward his own goals, e.g., taking control of Denver and influencing the Church of the Dragon and its CotD Reborn offshoot.

Daviar currently considers Ghostwalker to be in breach of their agreement in both tactics and goals. She intends to counter his actions, or more forcefully advance the legacy as she understands it to be. She plans to exploit his apparent weakness and distraction to check his actions and ambitions involving the current Treaty of Denver negotiations and other activities. Daviar and her agents have also been reaching out to endear herself and the Draco Foundation to Denver-area groups such as the Hub spirit community and members of Dunkelzahn's old Watcher network who have aligned themselves with Ghostwalker or who have gone freelance. She also opened a line of dialogue with the leadership of both CotD sects after admitting that the foundation's longstanding policy of non-contact with them failed.

- The Nadja seen in Denver may not have been the real deal, but it seems she was acting directly on Daviar's behalf.
- Snopes
- I'll just say it: Either Daviar or Ghostwalker, or both, were involved in the New Revolution. Aside from the whole "don't shit where you eat" aspect that came with the Unity Coalition leaving Denver almost immediately after GW's return, nothing changed in Denver while the rest of the continent fell into chaos. If the goal was to reunite North America, wiping out the city that is a living reminder of what is "wrong" with America today should have been at the top of the agenda. Instead nothing like that came close to happening.
- Riser
- Oh, God.
- Kay St. Irregular



- Yeah, you know better than that. Yes, I believe the “failed” insurrection was a feint. It was clear then and more now that those chuckleheads didn’t have a chance in hell of succeeding. GW was never in any danger of that happening because he knew. But now he’s holed up in his lair, and that indicates to me that he doesn’t think he’s safe anymore.
- Riser

POLITICS

Given her former standing, Daviar has certain special privileges in DeeCee. She has special access to specific people and resources that make her an invaluable resource to those pushing agendas. More importantly, everyone from President Colloton to the agents in the FBI Seattle Field Office wants to thoroughly interrogate her about the last decade, with the former having met secretly with Daviar on several occasions. The last meeting I know about included a discussion of their respective political futures, especially since Colloton has tied her and the GOP’s fortunes to ratifying the new Treaty of Denver. Daviar never ran a campaign within a machine or other national organization; her political acumen was focused on the goal of getting one ticket elected per election. Things have changed, and she now needs a permanent political operation to pursue both short-term and long-term domestic and international agendas.

- I’d love to be in the West Wing when she visited. “The boss is here! Everybody look busy!”
- Riser

Since reasserting her presence in the world, Daviar has been using her influence directly and indirectly. She is launching initiatives to coordinate information and influence with regard to the Treaty of Denver negotiations and to exercise the Draco Foundation’s observer role at the UN with a renewed vigor. The Draco Foundation has always supported the covert Commission on Megacorporate Affairs, but ever since Iker Lezabatxe, the former Basque president, became the Secretary-General, he has made it his mission to eradicate COMA and any of his predecessor’s “anti-business” programs and supporters within the organization. Hestaby’s speech to the General Assembly has further highlighted issues of dragon-human relations, which is a significant concern for the Draco Foundation.

The most surprising move she’s made related to political intrigue has been a set of clandestine meetings with Lugh Surehand and Jonathon Reed, held in Washington after the Watergate Incident. Ever since the Council of Princes dissolved, these two have circled each other. She was able to bring them together at the Willard with the help of a third Prince, Dar Varien, who’s been in DeeCee recruiting talent for his planned PMC, which is a European and global security matter that ties into her ownership in Reality Inc., the foundation’s actions within the UN, and her Baltic roots.

- What happened at the Watergate? For a few minutes we thought DeeCee had been nuked, and every killsat and battle platform went to DEFCON 2.
- Orbital DK

- The UCAS didn’t do anything. Ghostwalker returned to the Rift *with purpose*. He went through the Rift, and it closed behind him. But for the actions of certain individuals, the “nuke blast” his action caused would have destroyed DeeCee.
- Frosty

- I shouldn’t have asked.
- Orbital DK

- It is interesting that she used Varien as an intermediary. He’s signed deals with BIS, the AGS counterintelligence agency, and she can assist his expansion by squeezing as a consumer on one side (DF) and supplier on the other (Reality).
- Fianchetto

MEDIA

Daviar has been a media darling for most of her adult life. She was a regular in European media at 21, blew up globally after meeting with Dunkelzahn in Paris, and her celebrity has only grown over time. Given the intense interest and speculation surrounding her disappearance, everyone wants to be the first to get a sit-down interview with her because it will generate more viewers than this year’s Desert Challenge XXVII championship.

Before she vanished, Daviar was as much a media/style icon as a business mogul and politician. Her disappearance saw a spike—and subsequent decrease and leveling—of her Q rating and media share as some people continued to hold onto her as a social/media/style icon. Her return has caused a spike, and the increases in production and distribution of professional and fan-made creative products has created a collateral spike ranging from lawsuits to outright shadow activities between producers.

- One might expect her to have engaged in a media onslaught immediately upon reappearing. But delaying it like this is a clever way to keep the story alive and build up anticipation for a full interview.
- Dr. Spin

Her style and social influence situation extends to the group of fixers known as the Nadjas. It’s difficult to express how strange and difficult it is to deal with these women. I don’t know how loyal they actually are to Daviar, beyond whatever financial arrangement they have. I don’t even know how many there are, though I have only heard of six by name and a dozen by reputation. The scary part is that the profile implanted to match her physical likeness has bled through and commingled with their original psyches. Whoever is responsible for creating bunraku puppets identical down to the genetic level did the job too well, and that’s why they are *former* puppets.

- I don’t like Natalia, the one in Seattle. She kept looking at me like I was lunch. Then there’s the disturbing pattern of women she helps smuggle not always reaching Seattle.
- /dev/grrl
- Maybe she’s looking to expand her franchise.
- Butch

THE FUTURE

The big questions about Daviar are what she wants, and what she'll do to get it. The range of actions available to her is legion. Past performance is an indicator, but not guarantor, of future achievement. Her actions before her disappearance suggested a commitment to Dunkelzahn's vision of the power of humanity to progress in the long-term, despite short-term setbacks and reversals.

There are indications that some of the world took note of that message. An entire AAA megacorporation is apparently dedicated to that vision. But power, once taken, is rarely ceded voluntarily. Convenience and efficiency are not synonymous with improvement. More people have more access to knowledge and each other than at any point in human history, and yet those

tools rest on privilege granted by people and organizations that can and may revoke that privilege once it is no longer in their interest to continue granting it.

Daviar is running much of her affairs virtually or through various proxies, similar to what Dunkelzahn did before his death. She is not content to lord over a physical or electronic ivory tower like the Draco Foundation headquarters in Friendship Heights. Technology has further enhanced her ability to travel and communicate while maintaining logistical and operational control over her activities. Given her relationship with the Nadjas and her own background, it is possible—and probable—that she is taking an active role and micromanaging her agenda contrary to her stated intent. She has the resources to act covertly, and recent events suggest that in spite of her famous visage, Daviar is capable of doing so without being recognized.

NADJA DAVIAR

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	5	4	3	9	6	6	6	9	6	6	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/12

Armor (B/I): 6/2

Skills: Artisan (Harp) 2 (+2), Athletics skill group 3, Computer 3, Con 5, Data Search 6, Disguise 2, Etiquette 6 (10), First Aid 2, Infiltration 4, Intimidation 6 (10), Leadership 5, Negotiation 7 (11), Perception 6, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Arcanoarchaeology 3, Ares Macrotechnology 4, Banking (Tax Havens) 4 (+2), Business (Finance) 5 (+2), Classical Music (For Harp) 4 (+2), Diplomacy 5, Draco Foundation 6, Dracofoms (Great Dragons) 5 (+2), Economics 3, Espionage 3, European Politics 4, High Society (DeeCee) 5 (+2), History (European) 5 (+2), Law (UCAS) 4 (+2), Literature 4, Magic Background 4, Mystic Legends 5, Military (UCAS) 3 (+2), Philosophy (Political) 3 (+2), Psychology 4, Security Providers 2, Smuggling Routes (Europe) 2 (+2), Smuggler Havens (Europe) 2 (+2), Tradecraft 3, UCAS Politics 6, Estonian N, English 5, Finnish 6, French 4, German 4, Polish 4, Russian 6, Spanish 3

Qualities: Adept, Analytical Mind, Aptitude (Negotiation), Exceptional Attribute (Charisma), Pacifist 1, Photographic Memory

Initiate Grade: 3

Adept Abilities: Analytics (4), Cloak (8), Commanding Voice, Improved Ability: Etiquette (4), Improved Ability: Negotiation (4), Improved Ability: Intimidation (4), Kinesics, Linguistics, Multi-Tasking

Metamagics: Centering, Cognition, Masking

Gear: Transys Cybernaut w/ NSA Sentinel OS (Response 9, Signal 8, System 10, Firewall 10), Rating 10 IC (Analyze 10, Attack 10, Blackout 10, Encrypt 10, Track 10, Armor 10), Singularity Encore 10, Transys Florence 10, satellite link, skinlink, subvocal microphone, trode rig, AR gloves, biometric readers (retinal, fingerprint, DNA, voice), directional antenna; repeater drone (2); area jammer 10; white noise generator 6; camera burner 6; Eurocar Westwind 3000; emerald-green Zoé dress or light grey Berwick suit

Notes: Given her positions of power, Daviar has access to almost any other gear she may need for a particular encounter.

Shadowrun Options: For campaigns making use of The Way of the Adept's optional rules Nadja adds the Quality: The Speaker's Way. Modifying her adept power costs accordingly changes the ratings of the following powers: Improved Ability: Etiquette (5), Improved Ability: Negotiation (5), Improved Ability: Intimidation (5). In addition, add the power Improved Ability: Con (2).

RAEL WHITEOAK

POSTED BY: SUNSHINE

VITAL STATS: RAEAL WHITEOAK

Age: 48 **Height:** 1.73 m
Weight: 57 kg **Hair:** Brown
Eyes: Blue **Gender:** Female
Metatype: Elf **Awakened:** No

I enjoy the newsnets, not because they rely on truth or any kind of real in-depth information or insight (my contributions excepted, of course). I love them because you always know what you're gonna get: lies. I'm not looking for truth, I'm looking for something interesting. One thing that really gets my blood pumping is a good old-fashioned mystery. Especially if that mystery is a person.

I was rummaging about the Matrix and poking my nose around, as I am want to do, and I started piecing through some information about Charisma Associates. I love these guys. They are revolutionary on many levels, and their people have always been kind to me and mine, including that time I went out with a team and gallivanted around in the dark, dodging bullets and smelling our own burning hair after we got too close to a fireball-happy mage that time. Seriously, that one really was fun. Other runs, not so much. But I digress ...

Back to Charisma Associates. Given the high profile of their activities, I became more and more curious about their vice president, Ms. Rael WhiteOak. She's engineering the activities of the division that leads Horizon in terms of shadow work, but it turns out there isn't a whole lot out there about her—at least, not much that's older than a couple of years. Now, I don't want to go all Plan 9 here and dive into a ton of conspiracy theories, but I really wanted to know about her. So I did what I do. I poked my nose in other people's business and found out some stuff.

- She keeps a deliberately low profile, because she does not want to be seen as the face of Charisma Associates. If a PR person gets too famous, they might be perceived as taking luster from the people they represent. And their famous and insecure clients don't like that.
- Dr. Spin

Here's what I got: Ms. WhiteOak was promoted from within—she worked for Horizon for about four years before she ascended to her current position. Her responsibilities at Horizon when she started? The always popular “unspecified services.” She has a wafer-thin personnel file from that period, with the basic background info and nothing else. I couldn't find any internal memos or any other evidence that would have told me what she

was up to in her professional life. I got one small thing from her personnel file, though, that helped me out.

There was a piece of medical information in her file—she took two weeks off and had Horizon's internal medical department take care of what was described as “shoulder joint replacement.” Which would be a strange operation for an elf in her mid-forties, and also would have remarkably quick recovery time. So I followed a hunch and conducted some searches on the usual terms—middle name, place of birth, streets she had lived on, that sort of thing.

It took a lot of digging and a number of follow-up interviews, but eventually I had a story about an elf named Vorilhon who got shot in the shoulder while trying to extract a PR executive from Aztechnology. This happened just before WhiteOak started her “shoulder replacement” treatment. The clincher was the name. For those of you not up on fringe religions of the 20th century, there was a group founded by a guy named Claude Vorilhon, a group that took on the name Vorilhon adopted for himself. That name was Rael.

- Should I reserve space here for Plan 9 to make a claim that WhiteOak is Claude Vorilhon, only Awakened and with a sex change and leónization and ...
- Slamm-O!
- I know none of you seem to believe this, but I have my limits.
- Plan 9

The people who ran with the runner known as Vorilhon were a cagey bunch. They were happy to talk about their past exploits when I tracked them down, but they didn't offer too many details about Vorilhon, or about any other member of their group, for that matter. They wouldn't give me a physical description of her (not even her metatype), and they didn't offer any direct assessments of her personality. But people's actions are telling enough, I've always found, and the stories they told provided some interesting details.

One story I heard a couple of times involved some dirty tricks in a political campaign (again, the runners were too cagey to offer enough details for me to pin this to any particular race). We all know that it's not enough any more to convince voters that a certain politician is dishonest—they tend to think politicians are habitual liars anyway, so a lack of honesty does not come as a shock to them. Convincing voters that a politician is bought and paid for by someone completely opposed to their interests, on the other hand, is a different matter. It's not so much the dishonesty that gets them; it's the fact that people they don't like will be getting benefits at their expense.

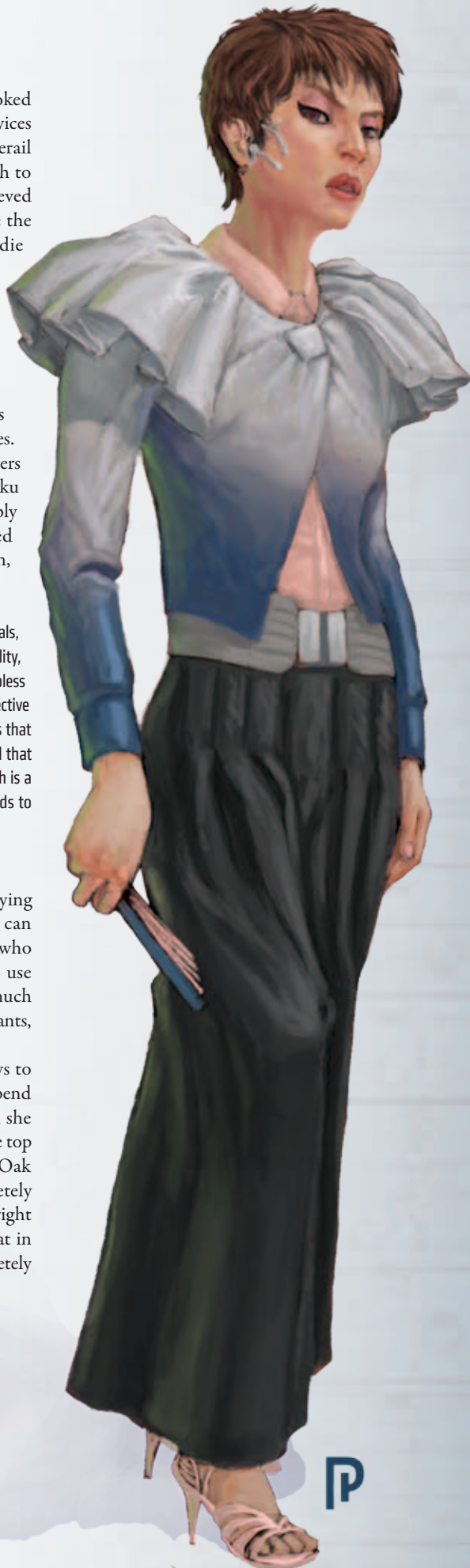
So there was an incumbent running for mayor of some city who was spending a lot of time on damage control, like politicians tend to do—responding to rumors, defending against attacks by other candidates, that sort of thing. Then a bombshell dropped—trideo footage came out showing the candidate in a

bunraku parlor enjoying the services of a puppet who looked just like Richard Villiers. Now, while enjoying bunraku services (whether inter- or intra-gender) may not be enough to derail a politician's campaign, the Villiers fetish could be enough to disturb a significant quantity of voters. Most observers believed the trid footage to be clearly faked, so that was the angle the mayor's campaign worked on, hoping the issue would die away. But it didn't—the public flames (fanned by stories and well-placed rumors planted by Vorilhon's group) continued to burn, and eventually the mayor was forced to take a more dramatic step. He revealed that the trid footage could not be genuine, because at the time when it was supposedly filmed, he was two thousand kilometers away. Which is all fine and good, except that his location was a private retreat for Renraku America executives. His alibi was that instead of literally being in bed with a Villiers look-alike, he was metaphorically in bed with the Renraku Computer Services. In the eyes of the public, that was possibly even worse, and he lost the election. Through well-placed misinformation followed by a steady whispering campaign, Vorilhon and her group pulled off a bloodless coup.

- Important sociological point: humans, both as a group and as individuals, most fear the things they believe just might be true. A remote possibility, like a meteor destroying the Earth, doesn't cause nearly as many sleepless nights as the hypothetical death of a child. So the reason it can be effective to show voters that a politician might be too cozy with corporations is that they secretly fear that all politicians are mere corporate puppets, and that their vote is far less important than the will of the corporations, which is a perfectly legitimate concern. The fact that their fear is true only tends to make things worse.
- Winterhawk

That mission helps demonstrate WhiteOak's underlying philosophy in designing runs and hiring runners. You can throw a rock in the Barrens and hit two or three runners who are decent shots, but finding runners who know how to use information as a tool—or better yet, as a weapon—is a much more difficult task. That's the kind of runners WhiteOak wants, and that's who she hires.

WhiteOak was successful enough in her running days to get herself noticed by Horizon's upper management. She spend some time serving as Ms. Johnson for Horizon runs, and she once again excelled, paving the way for her emergence at the top of Charisma Associates. In her time as a Johnson, WhiteOak gained fame in Horizon's inner circles for seeming completely trustworthy even when she was preparing to pull the rug right out from under her runners' feet. This was so extreme that in one case, runners remained loyal to her even after she completely screwed them.



The run in question targeted Iris Software in the PCC. It was a datasteal—the runners were looking for a particular program prototype, hoping to get it into the hands of Horizon’s software engineers so they wouldn’t have trouble keeping pace with their rivals. WhiteOak started planting seeds early, making sure the party heard rumors of some questionable research the facility was conducting about ways to encapsulate psychotropic IC into BTL chips in ways that would be extremely hard to detect until it was unleashed by the unsuspecting user. By the time they got out of the facility, the runners were pretty sure they had something illegal on their hands, and the appearance of a SecForce Matrix brigade drone only made the more nervous about what they had on their hands. They hurried to the handoff, which dissolved into chaos when both PCC and NeoNET showed up to interrupt things. After some yelling, a few exchanges of shots, and a flurry of Matrix combat, WhiteOak calmed everyone down and managed to untangle the situation. The SecForce forces confiscated the illegal piece of software, the NeoNET forces were made to withdraw, and the runners were told they would not be charged in connection with possession of the mind-warping BTL software as long as they left the PCC. The runners were happy to accept the terms, as they knew that the PCC is not kind to foreign BTL smugglers. They didn’t get paid, but they sung WhiteOak’s praises for getting them out of a sticky situation.

The situation had, of course, been contrived by WhiteOak in the first place. Given Horizon’s tight relationship with the PCC, security had known about the entire operation from its inception. The NeoNET security officers that showed up to the handoff were fakes engineered by WhiteOak. The PCC was going to share the confiscated goods with Charisma Associates, which meant WhiteOak got the software she wanted without having to pay for it. (She had to outlay some cash for the imitation guards, but paying some actors to dress up for a bit is far cheaper than paying for a datasteal). She accomplished this by taking advantage of runners who, once it was all over, would work for her again at the drop of a hat if they had the chance.

- Not everyone likes her that much, because not everyone is that trusting. She tried something similar on a run involving Renraku in Seattle, and while the runners were confused in the chaos of the handoff, they did their legwork afterward and found out what she had been up to. They’re working at spreading the word.
- Stone
- Unsurprisingly, negative campaigns against Charisma and WhiteOak don’t do very well.
- Dr. Spin

The exact source of her persuasive abilities is unclear. Some people say she’s wired up, others say she’s a social adept. I tend to lead toward the former, since no one has records of seeing much of an Awakened aura on her. It helps that she’s naturally charming, with plenty of corporate savvy. Not to say that she couldn’t handle herself in a back alley, either for business or pleasure. Charisma, like any other organization, has occasion to wipe the slate clean after some delicate job has been completed, and in her early days WhiteOak was personally involved in some of these events. As she has grown into her job, though, she tends to pass off that sort of work to underlings.

- Oh, she’s augmented all right. With fingernails that make tiger claws look dull, among other things.
- Butch

There are times when she is satisfied with just wiping out people’s memories instead of wiping them out of existence. This usually involves a simple dose of laés, which she has a ready supply of, but sometimes she calls upon her magic-wielding underlings to do a memory wipe, or if they’re performing a truly complicated job, a memory alteration. These memory wipes have contributed to the lack of hard information on her, as many of the people who have met her just plain don’t remember the occasion.

I don’t believe the lack of info on her is entirely nefarious. Maybe she is just a very private person. And she doesn’t want sleazy people from the scandalblogs rummaging through her garbage. The lack of knowledge her certainly hasn’t hurt her career—she is well respected by her peers.

Rael was hands-on for some of the most important projects Charisma has handled recently. She is in Tír Tairngire regularly—making sure things go well there is critical, as Horizon CEO Gary Cline staked CA’s reputation on success in the Tír. Their success has made Larry Zincan one of CA’s most dedicated clients, and he is working with Rael to not only continue their PR efforts but to make sure they are prepared for any future challenges that might come their way. That means keeping as close a watch as possible on Lugh Surehand, which is no easy task.

She also helped engineer Horizon’s reaction to the death of singing star Christy Dae, managing information so well that most average guys on the street know nothing about the seamier stories surrounding her death, including allegations of a sex tape made just before she died. Thanks to WhiteOak’s efforts (and teams of shadowrunners monitoring communications channels to quash any unfavorable info that got out), Dae has almost universally viewed as a beautiful flower that was plucked too soon, and her posthumous album sales have surged in response to this image.

- It’s amazing what you can do to a pop star’s image when they’re not around to mess things up any more.
- Dr. Spin

As should be the case with any good VP, WhiteOak has some secret projects she's working on. She has interviewed about 48 women so far for some special op group. I don't know if it is for a new advertising campaign, stealth marketing, or what, but observers I've heard from say that more than one recruit bears a resemblance to Nadja Daviar.

- It's too late in the game for her to be part of the existing network of Nadjas that's roaming around out there. My guess is she wants to play off their fame. If a demand is growing for operatives that look like Nadja Daviar, why not tap into it?
- Kia
- It's about more than just responding to growing demand. What better way to infiltrate one network of Nadjas than with another network of your own?
- Kay St. Irregular

The propaganda surrounding the Az-Am war is another significant focus for her. The prospect of gaining an advantage, any advantage, on Aztechnology is very alluring, so WhiteOak is always quite interested in reports from the operative known as "Agent," and she pores over them to find ways to build an advantage for Charisma and Horizon. I expect them to take some bold steps in that fight in the near future.

RAEL WHITEOAK

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	5 (7)	5	3	8	5	5 (7)	6	6	2.99	10	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 9/5

Skills: Disguise 3, Diving 2, Electronics skill group 4, First Aid 4, Forgery (Image Doctoring) 3 (+2), Gymnastics 3, Influence skill group 6, Perception 5, Pilot Aircraft 4, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols (Light Pistols) 4 (+2), Running 2, Throwing Weapons 3, Tracking 2, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Horizon Corporate Structure 6, Military Psychological Operations 4, Public Relations 5, Psychology 6, Political Communications (Message Control) 5 (+2), Sociology 3, Tír Tairngire Politics 5, English N, German 4, Japanese 5, Mandarin 4, Or'zet 3, Spanish 5, Sperthiel 5

Qualities: First Impression, Photographic Memory, SINner

Augmentations: (all betaware) Cerebral Booster 2, cyberears [Rating 2, w/ audio enhancement 3, damper], cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ low-light vision, smartlink, thermographic vision, vision enhancement 3], muscle toner 2, nephritic screen 3, orthoskin 3, sleep regulator, tailored pheromones 3

Gear: Altskin (w/ armor), area jammer (Rating 9), commlink (custom, Response 5, Signal 4, Firewall 6, System 4), DocWagon Super-Platinum contract, 10 x doses laés, nanopaste disguise (small container), 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo (light pistol), tag eraser, Zoé Executive Suite Line (long jacket, plain blouse, skirt)

Programs: Analyze 3, Armor 3, Browse 4, Encrypt 4, Stealth 4, Track 2

Weapons:

Hammerli 620S [Light pistol, DV 4P or 6S(e), AP — or -half, RC 1, ammo 6 (c), w/ personalized grip, 100 rounds stick-n-shock ammo]

3 thermal smoke grenades [Grenade, DV —, AP —, Blast 10m radius]

RICHARD VILLIERS & MILES LANIER

POSTED BY: MR. BONDS

Given that we all believe we should “shoot straight, conserve ammo, and never, ever deal with a dragon,” the next step would be coming to a proper understanding of the true definition of “dragon.” Not all dragons are big, scaly, fire-breathing reptiles—some of the most dangerous are the dragons that walk in the form of men. If you’ve been working in the business long, you’ve almost certainly dealt with Richard Villiers and Miles Lanier, even if you didn’t know it, and even if there were many removes in between you and them. As much as is made of this being the age of free spirits, otaku, cyborgs, great dragons, and AIs, the ambition and schemes of these two mundane, minimally augmented humans have shaped the world we live in as much as anyone or anything else. This is, however, more than just a rumination on their global impact. There are practical things to know about these two. If you aspire to doing business in any even semi-legitimate field and making any sort of real money, Richard Villiers is a man to study. And if you are a criminal regularly engaged in industrial espionage for hire, Miles Lanier, Villiers’ right hand man, is the sort of opponent you should fear the most.

The two words most commonly used to describe Richard Villiers are “ruthless” and “brilliant.”

Richard Villiers was born in Boston in 2007 and will turn 66 this year—he doesn’t look his age by any means, but he doesn’t seem to have gone for all-out Leonization either. His father was a stockbroker, and his mother was a childhood education professional.

- While we’re on the color-commentary part, did you know Villiers is a Yankees fan? Bizarre for having been born and raised in Boston.
- Dr. Spin

He graduated with honors from Boston-area prep schools, from Harvard, and then with an MBA in business from Harvard Business School in 2030 at the age of 23, un-delayed by the Crash of 2029. Focused, determined, and ambitious, Villiers was a young corporate shark who hit the water and didn’t stop swimming. For the first half of the 2030s, he worked as a corporate raider and cost-killer, buying companies, restructuring them, and selling them for a profit, an enterprise for which his well-to-do father and his rich HBS friends must have given him plenty of seed money.

In late 2033, Villiers attended a demonstration of the first desk-sized cyberterminal by Matrix Systems of Boston, and he began his ascent to the stage of financial history. Matrix Systems was owned by Ken Roper and Michael Eld, both veterans of Echo Mirage, who were showcasing their product to local venture capitalists who, like Villiers, were looking for investments. Villiers immediately recognized the opportunity he’d been given and attempted to buy Matrix

Systems. Roper and Eld refused, limiting him to a 49-percent stake. Matrix Systems released the Portal in 2034 to tremendous success and profits. Before the owners of Matrix Systems could buy out Villiers, however, both men were killed in “accidents,” and their data was erased. No doubt, this was the work of the very first generation of shadowrunners, hired by Villiers himself.

- Seems a bit obvious. Wasn’t Villiers brought up on charges?
- Kane
- He was named as a person of interest, but never officially charged. At the time, the hot rumor in the shadows was that the UCAS government had sanctioned the hit to keep proprietary Echo Mirage tech out of the hands of foreign governments and businesses. As is so often the case, we’ll never know for sure who was truly responsible. But Villiers certainly stood to benefit the most.
- Kay St. Irregular

Villiers was able to buy the rest of Matrix Systems for pennies on the dollar—it later became a Fuchi subsidiary, then part of Novatech, and is currently part of NeoNET’s holdings—and somehow mysteriously wound up in possession of working specs for the Portal, some next-generation prototypes, and the rest of the data that had mysteriously evaporated from the Matrix Systems mainframes. He contacted Fuchi Industrial Electronics and managed to trade his control of the next-generation cyberdeck technology, his own significant corporate portfolio, and JRJ International into one-third ownership of the growing consumer electronics giant, as well as control of their North American operations. That was how the name of an American businessman, Villiers, joined Yamana and Nakatomi on Fuchi’s board. The triumvirate-controlled corporation released the CTD-1000, the first commercial cyberdeck. The rest is history.

- What’s so important about JRJ International?
- Clockwork
- Only that they were one of the original Big Seven megacorps that controlled a seat on the Corporate Court.
- Cosmo
- Few people remember it, since it’s overshadowed entirely by the explosive dissolution of Fuchi, but Villiers’ entry into Fuchi’s higher echelons wasn’t entirely without incident either. Korin Yamana wanted Villiers on board so that Fuchi could release the first mass-market cyberdeck and make a killing, but Kiyoshi Nakatomi, the other controlling interest in Fuchi at the time, had his reasons for wanting to block the deal. So he wound up getting whacked by his limousine driver, who conveniently got whacked himself before he



VITAL STATS: MILES LANIER

Age: 60	Height: 1.8 m
Weight: 72.6 kg	Hair: Chestnut
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: No

VITAL STATS: RICHARD VILLIERS

Age: 66	Height: 1.75 m
Weight: 81.6 kg	Hair: Black
Eyes: Brown	Gender: Male
Metatype: Human	Awakened: No

could see trial. His son Shikei Nakatomi picked up his shares, and the deal went through. Neither Yamana nor Villiers was accused of anything, although either one (or both) of them could have been behind it.

- Rigger X

Now we must take a moment to talk about Villiers' partner in crime, Miles Lanier. Lanier, another Boston native, was born in 2013. Lanier's mother, like Villiers, was an educator, but she was a public school teacher, and Lanier's father was a mechanic. Lanier was born and raised in South Boston, a tough, blue-collar Irish neighborhood (some would go so far as to say a crime-ridden ghetto), and although his test scores were in the top one percentile, even with financial aid and scholarships there were no Ivy League schools in his future. Not interested in the pitches thrown his way by various corporate talent scouts, he joined the UCAS Army as soon as he graduated high school in 2031. He subsequently distinguished himself as a sniper in the UCAS Army Rangers.

- For what it's worth, Mr. Bonds is understating the case here. Open military records show that Lanier had 21 confirmed kills, one of them at over 2,000 meters. Those Canuck sniper schools certainly knew how to train 'em.
- Picador

Lanier was honorably discharged in 2036, after five years of service. Rumors conflict as to why—some say he was wounded or had a near-death experience, while others simply say he lost interest and no longer felt challenged—whatever the case, he moved on to the private sector. He was one of the first employees hired by Villiers after Villiers leveraged his way onto the board of Fuchi, and the two men became fast friends, although their personalities could not be more different. Villiers is flashy and suave, an accomplished showman and salesman, while Lanier is cold, quiet, and calculating, and speaks only rarely, concentrating instead on careful observation.

Although Lanier's new position was more cerebral than physical, his natural intelligence and attention to detail—as well as the patience and precision required of a sniper—aided his fast ascent through Fuchi's ranks. In the next ten years he became the company's Director of Internal Security. As Villiers' right-hand man, Lanier's brilliant and complex security schemes not only foiled external threats (like shadowrunners) but also preserved the delicate balance between the three ambitious families vying for control of Fuchi at the time: Villiers, Yamana, and Nakatomi.

The death of President Dunkelzahn in 2057 changed everything for Miles Lanier—or at least, that's how it must have seemed at the time. A bequest in Dunkelzahn's will left four million of the wyrm's shares in Renraku—along with the seat on the board of directors that they controlled—to Lanier. This created an obvious conflict of loyalties for Lanier, putting him in charge of internal security for one AAA while holding a seat on the board of another. Fuchi security managers ran around like headless chickens trying to prepare contingency plans, but there was greater chaos in store. The same will gave Villiers Fuchi shares amounting to control of another two percent of the company.

The very same day, Fuchi's talented director of internal security turned in his letter of resignation, opting instead for the cushy life of a Renraku executive. The close friendship that

Villiers and Lanier shared during their time at Fuchi dissolved in a public, heated argument. Lanier began launching a series of economic and shadow attacks against his former employer, using insider knowledge to score several former Fuchi subsidiaries for his new masters at Renraku. Fuchi sanctioned deniable assets to make several attempts on Lanier's life, though none of them were successful. To no one's surprise, Lanier turned out to be a hard man to kill, particularly for operatives who had in many cases been trained by him or at least worked with him.

Lanier jumping ship to Renraku was huge for both corporations, including all of the factions in Fuchi. For Renraku, it meant the opportunity to penetrate Fuchi's security using Lanier's intel and do some major damage to the competition, but it also raised the possibility of Lanier being a Fuchi plant. Renraku management did all the due diligence they could, from round-the-clock surveillance to invasive background checks, and after two years of working with Lanier they came to trust him. For Yamana and Nakatomi, this meant that their rivals had gained a dangerous advantage, which caused them to work together for the first time in years. And for Villiers, Lanier's apparent betrayal meant that the slim edge he had over his competitors was gone, and he had to act fast or risk losing it all.

- And for the rest of us, it meant that lots of shadowrunners got rich and stayed anonymous, while others became famous and dead.
- Fastjack

While the shadow war between Renraku and Fuchi was waging, with Lanier apparently helping his new chums at Renraku dismantle his former employers, Villiers was very busy. Management purges in the offices and subsidiaries he directly controlled ensured that the only remaining employees were ones loyal to him. Meanwhile, Villiers began quietly buying up his own companies through shell corporations like Cambridge Holdings, Northwest Assets, Blue Cap Limited, and Blaze PLC. He did not limit his acquisitions to Fuchi subsidiaries, but expanded his holdings.

Finally, in June 2059, Fuchi brought Lanier before the corporate court on charges of industrial espionage. The emergency meeting of the Corporate Court required all justices to convene in person on Zurich-Orbital, with all justices physically present and the deliberation taking place under Matrix silence.

- This incident is one of the times we've come closest to all-out corporate warfare. Renraku chatter seemed to indicate that they were preparing a preemptive military strike against Fuchi, with both primary combatants and all of the other AAAs involved in an elaborate strategic dance to ensure that their significant military assets were optimally positioned in case all hell broke loose. An Omega Order, EMP strikes, and even the literal nuclear option were all on the table. Obviously (and thankfully) it never came to that, although there were a few "border skirmishes" that became close calls in and of themselves.
- Kia

Eighteen hours of tense silence later, the court finally handed down its decision. Lanier was ordered to sell his four million shares of Renraku stock to the Z-O Gemeinschaft bank at slightly below market value (causing Renraku stock prices to

plummet), resign from Renraku, and turn himself over to Fuchi internal security. The decision, which bought Fuchi some time against Renraku but left the battle lines within the corporation more clearly drawn than ever, caused many of the participants to blink in confusion, but not Villiers and Lanier. Of course, as we now know, the entire thing was possibly the greatest long con perpetrated in the entire 21st century, orchestrated by Villiers and Lanier working together to weaken Fuchi and Renraku and fund the birth of Novatech.

In September 2059, on White Monday during the Tokyo stock market crash, Richard Villiers finished his masterstroke. He formed Novatech Incorporated after dumping his Fuchi shares, sold the first half to make the stock price plummet, then he let go of the remaining half after Nakatomi and Yamana raised the price with a bidding war.

- What Mr. Bonds is leaving out is that it was Villiers who orchestrated the White Monday crash in the first place.
- Plan 9
- A “fact” most likely omitted due to the complete lack of any kind of supporting evidence.
- Snopes

The final twist of the knife was that Villiers had regained control of JRJ International and hence gained control of Fuchi’s seat on the Corporate Court, as well as the justice who controlled it (who was a Villiers loyalist). The remainder of Fuchi fell apart, with Yamana and Nakatomi fighting each other tooth and claw over what was left. The remnants of the company eventually fell to Renraku and Shiawase to pick over. In a single brilliant move, Villiers had weakened Renraku significantly and destroyed Fuchi. His first action after forming Novatech was to bring Lanier on board as his head of security, letting the entire world in on the deception. The tactic of sabotaging your own position/organization while secretly building something stronger and better became known as the Villiers Maneuver.

- Everyone understands why this is important, right? People don’t crush corporations—corporations crush people. Villiers, with Lanier as his more-than-able accomplice, is the exception, proving the rule or not.
- Baka Dabora

The newly formed Novatech was lean and mean, but its initial success was short lived. Even with the billions he’d made from deft stock transactions, Villiers had borrowed a lot of money to execute the last phase of his plan, and he was under attack from multiple quarters as the other megas reacted to the newest threat. One unusual angle of attack was Art Dankwalther, a former Fuchi employee who blamed Villiers for the destruction of the corporation and of his life. Dankwalther intentionally styled himself as Villiers’ arch-nemesis. With all of his assets under attack, Villiers was forced to take Novatech public, offering twenty percent of its stock in an initial public offering in the hope of gaining enough liquidity to counterattack and keep Novatech afloat.

- Dankwalther was only able to launch his attacks on Villiers because of funds left to him by Dunkelzahn’s will. That means the Big D was responsible for originating Villiers’, Lanier’s, and Dankwalther’s parts in the sordid little corporate drama that unfolded. It’s a shame we’ll never know why.
- Frosty

It was during Novatech’s IPO that Crash 2.0 happened. As Villiers had been the first to react to the commercial release of the first generation cyberterminal, so too was he one of the first to realize the incredible marketability of WiFi Matrix technology, especially in a post-Crash society. Before the dust of Crash 2.0 had settled, Villiers had made arrangements with Anders Malmstein of Transys-Erika, a corporation pioneering the bleeding edge in communications technology with its WMI (Wireless Matrix Initiative). Their partnership resulted in NeoNET, a name that surely needs no introduction, rising from the ashes with Villiers at the helm yet again. Anders Malmstein retained a controlling interest, with Celedyr, the great dragon behind Transys-Erika partner Transys Neuronet, holding onto only a minority share. (Art Dankwalther, incidentally, didn’t survive Crash 2.0, courtesy of a Corporate Court Omega Order and subsequent Thor shot.)

- Ouch.
- Kane

At present, Richard Villiers is the chief executive officer of NeoNET, with Anders Malmstein the chairman of the board. Villiers holds the largest single share of the company by a narrow margin, with 22 percent. Malmstein holds 18 percent, the great dragon Celedyr holds 13.5 percent, Trans-Latvian enterprises holds 11 percent, and tens of thousands of other small stakeholders control another 24.5 percent. Miles Lanier holds a 4 percent stake—small potatoes (although small potatoes in this case means millions upon millions of nuyen), but exactly enough to tip the balance in favor of one of the other stakeholders. The remaining 7 percent of the corporation belongs to Samantha Villiers, Richard’s ex-wife.

Besides Miles Lanier, there are only a few people that Villiers trusts, and most of those people are immediate relatives. Samantha Villiers and her husband were divorced largely because they were too much alike, which speaks volumes about her. Like her ex-husband, she is charming, ambitious, and utterly ruthless. While they have maintained amiable relations for a divorced couple—even dating one another on and off, with a mutual attraction that continues to flare up from time to time, according to the tabloids—Samantha has been anything but a willing accomplice for her husband’s schemes. In addition to being the operational director of NeoNET Seattle, she has projects of her own to advance (when she is not thwarting his agenda for the hell of it). Recently, the “woman behind the man” has been making corporate acquisitions of her own outside of the NeoNET umbrella.

Richard and Samantha had a daughter, Caroline Tara Villiers—shortened to just Cara—and the apple did not fall far from the tree. Cara Villiers has outgrown her teenage rebellious streak and is currently being groomed as Richard’s successor.





- That's not quite the full story on the little princess or her "rebellious streak." Back in 2053, she actually tried to assassinate her mother while under the influence—magical, psychotropic, or otherwise—of a terrorist polyclub. The assassination attempt failed, and Cara lost the use of a hand in the process. After that she ran the shadows for a while under the street name of Rouge before coming back into the fold.
- Kat o' Nine Tales
- The bitch took everything she learned from our side of the tracks back with her to NeoNET, and now she's running NeoNET's black operations in Seattle. If you meet with a NeoNET Johnson, there's at least a fifty/fifty chance that he's answering to her. She has also been known to handle certain sensitive matters personally.
- Riser

Villiers also had two siblings, Darren and Martin. Darren Villiers is a dwarf and an initiated adept, making him the only metahuman and the only Awakened individual in the Villiers family tree. He handled shadow ops first at Fuchi, then Novatech, and now NeoNET, acting as the sword to Lanier's shield. Since then he has been promoted and transferred to NeoNET TransAsia. Darren's recent decision to join the Knights of Rage, an organization that answers personally to Celedyr, has caused a significant strain in the relationship between the brothers, compounded by Darren's assistance in Samantha's plans for Asian expansion. Richard's other sibling, Martin, is the only member of the family who is not a NeoNET employee. A well-known philanthropist who has donated millions that he made during the Novatech IPO to various charitable organizations, he is rumored to have political aspirations and a good chance of realizing them. Richard and Martin are on amiable terms, but have little business interaction as Martin moves in entirely different spheres of influence.

So if those are Richard Villiers people, then who are Miles Lanier's? No one. Lanier has several trusted employees, one friend (Villiers), and no family. He has never been a man who has formed personal relationships quickly, easily, or lightly.

- So is Lanier gay then?
- Kat o' Nine Tales
- Not according to any media speculation I've ever seen. And it's not like we're (generally speaking) living in the day and age where that kind of thing needs to be suppressed, either.
- Sunshine
- I have it on good authority that Miles Lanier fathered an illegitimate child on a Chiba prostitute in 2057 after his "defection" to Renraku. He never publicly adopted or claimed the boy, or even lent him his name, but he did arrange for local shadow assets to protect the child when he was called before the Corporate Court in 2059 at the height of the Fuchi-Renraku war, just before the dissolution of Fuchi. Lanier kept tabs on his bastard until 2064, when Crash 2.0 permanently severed his channels of surveillance.
- Icarus

- How do you *know* this shit? I'm not even doubting it, just ... what gives?
- Slamm-O!
- Damned if I know, *omae*, but I'd guess it's not because he's the mother.
- Pistons

The fact that his boss is his only meaningful human relationship seems to have grated on Lanier over time. So has the reality that his entire life he has been defined by the media and the world as the sidekick and accomplice of a great man. He has not really been celebrated for his own accomplishments, even though Lanier was the one who orchestrated the ploy that weakened Renraku, eliminated Fuchi, and created Novatech from its bones. It's hard to say what straw broke the camel's back, but perhaps all of the chafing under the yoke finally amounted to something, because Miles Lanier has been AWOL from NeoNET for months. If Lanier's disappearance is what it seems to be, it calls into question the fate of Lanier's stock, which could decide the balance of power within the company. Additionally, Lanier's absence has created a power vacuum at the point where the corporation's interests meet the shadows, which Cara is slowly filling.

- I'm not sure that I buy the idea that simple jealousy was enough to undermine the dynamic duo's friendship and cause Lanier to jump ship. Remember that these two have leveraged a public "falling out" to their advantage before.
- Stone
- One other possibility is that Lanier is aware of a danger to NeoNET's security so fundamentally compromising that he must act on his own, without organizational support, to avoid tipping his hand. If that were true, it would raise the question of whether Villiers even knew that Lanier was still on his side.
- Fianchetto
- What could such a threat be?
- Rigger X
- Most likely internal. Samantha's ambitions, Celedyr's fringe projects, whoever the real owners of Trans-Latvian are. The possibilities are endless.
- Icarus
- Art Dankwalther back from the dead, Elio hann's ghost ...
- Plan 9
- Oh would you shut up.
- Snopes
- If we go with Occam's Razor, a simpler explanation is that Lanier simply wanted to go back to his roots, working in the field rather than behind a desk. Call it the thirty-year itch. It happens.
- Picador

Regardless of the effects of Lanier's continued absence on the corporation, it has had a significant deleterious effect on Villiers. The reality ironically parallels the charade that Villiers put on during Lanier's "defection" to Renraku more than a decade ago. Villiers is isolated, his position is weakened, and he has no one to trust. While three of his family members are in

power within the corporation, all of them, like him, are serpents. Samantha and Darren have their own agenda of aggressive Asian expansion that conflicts with Richard's desire to avoid a repeated war with the Japanacorps. The person Villiers can trust the most right now is his daughter Cara, but even that must be done warily, since Samantha may be trying to court her away from him. He certainly cannot trust Celedyr, Malmstein, Verghese, or any of the other shareholders.

- Alone and surrounded by enemies inside and out. It must feel like Fuchi all over again to Villiers, a flashback to the bad old days when he didn't know whether Yamana or Nakatomi would try to kill him first.
- Baka Dabora

Nonetheless, Villiers continues to pursue his objectives to strengthen his control of the third megacorporation that he helped build. At present, from a strategic perspective and in no particular order, his priorities will probably be:

- Monitor his ex-wife Samantha, particularly her involvement in Asia and her increasing interest in the same magical artifacts that Celedyr is after.
- Monitor Celedyr to ensure that his frivolous and bizarre research projects don't hemorrhage capital that could be better spent elsewhere, and that his Knights of Rage aren't preparing to make a move against him for a greater stake in the corporation.
- Punish small investment corporation Reality Inc. for their hostile acquisition of Cavalier Arms.
- Block Swaraj Verghese's expansion into Africa to prevent him from establishing an independent power base.
- Maintain control of NeoNET's financial structure through Novatech's Boston HQ to make it more difficult for his enemies to disentangle his hands from the reins of the corporation.
- Investigate Trans-Latvian Enterprises to discover its true owner and the threat that they represent. Popular theories include that they are a front for European Mafia, the secret society of vampires known as the Ordo Maximus, or the Roman Catholic Church.
- Locate Miles Lanier.

It was most likely one of these agendas, especially the first, second, or sixth, that Miles Lanier was pursuing when he vanished from the public's radar. Lanier was supposedly investigating Trans-Latvian when he vanished, but he could just as easily have been really pursuing one of Villiers' other interests. Whatever he was doing and whatever it means, it puts the power duo in the most dangerous position they've been in since the corporate war of 2059. Of course, we all know how they came out of that one—on top.

- I know that Lanier was being followed through Europe for weeks by the Knights of Rage, Celedyr's pet gang, who were in turn being tracked by operatives of Hildebrandt-Kleinfort-Bernal, Celedyr's old enemies. Recently, however, the team of Knights that was tailing him was wiped out to a man. There's no telling if it was Villiers, HKB, or someone else.
- Frosty



- Any chance that Lanier just got geeked? I know we established he's hard to kill, but hard's not the same thing as impossible, and he is getting up in years.
- Hard Exit
- Doubtful. A man with his skills, his inside knowledge of Villiers' (and NeoNET's) business, and his voting stock would be worth infinitely more to the competition alive.
- Fianchetto
- If Lanier really is still working with Villiers in secret, they must have some means of communication, something secret and secure. But even a dead

drop or a cut-out would be difficult to maintain with someone as high profile as Villiers.

- Thorn
- You know, more than once, in London, in Berlin, and in Yokohama, I've acted as a middle man arranging these jobs to sneak random crap of miniscule value—a keg, a crate of whiskey, a box of fuckin' cocktail umbrellas—onto shipments bound for Boston. Specifically, this fairly anonymous bar downtown. It didn't pay conspicuously well, just slightly better than it should have, going by standard smugglers' rates. I know from weight and negotiations that it was never guns, drugs, or BTLs. Just sayin'.
- 2XL

RICHARD VILLIERS

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	4	4 (5)	3	6 (9)	7	6	6	8	4	11 (12)	1 (2)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 11/5

Skills: Athletics skill group 3, Biotech skill group 3, Business 6, Classic Cars 3, Con 5 (6), Cracking skill group 2, Dodge (Ranged) 5 (+2), Economics 6, Electronics skill group 5, Etiquette (Corporate) 6 (+2), Forgery 5, Intimidation 6, Instruction 5, Leadership 6, Mechanic skill group 1, Navigation 3, Negotiation (Diplomacy) 7 (+2), Perception 6 (8), Pilot Aircraft (Fixed Wing) 2 (+2), Pilot Ground Craft 3, Pilot Watercraft 2, Pistols (Semi-Automatics) 3 (+2), Stealth skill group 4, Survival 3, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Baseball 6, Fine Restaurants 4, History 4, Law 5, Literature 3, Matrix Design 5, NeoNET 6, Psychology 4, Security Design 3, Security Procedures 3, Yachting 3, English N, German 3, Japanese 6, Spanish 2

Qualities: Aptitude (Negotiation), Exceptional Attribute (Intuition), Home Ground (Boston), Lucky, Photographic Memory, Trustworthy (Con).

Augmentations (all deltaware): Clean Metabolism, Datajack, Dietware, Genewipe, Platelet Factories, Reception Enhancer (Rating 2), Synaptic Booster (Rating 1), Tailored Pheromones (Rating 3), Toxin Extractor (Rating 6), Trauma Damper.

Gear: Actioneer Business Suit [with Chemical Protection 6, Fire Resistance 6, Insulation 6 and Nonconductivity 6], biomonitor, contacts [Rating 3 with low light, flare compensation, and smartlink], custom commlink [Device Rating 9 w/ biometric reader, skinlink and subvocal microphone], FFBA full suit, fitted Armani, Brooks Brothers, and Zoe Executive Suite Line suits, linguasofts (any needed, each at Rating 5), Gulfstream Luxe V Jet, Harland & Wolf Classique III Yacht, Mitsubishi Nightsky Limousine [Handling -2, Accel 15/25, Speed 100, Pilot 6, Body 12, Armor 20, Sensor 6 w/ anti-theft system, armor upgrade, passenger protection, personal armor (Rating 10), pilot upgrade, smart armor 10, sensor upgrade and driver], Yankees 2013 World Series Ring.

Programs: Analyze 9, Browse 9, Edit 9, Encrypt 9, Scan 9, IC Agent [Rating 9, with Armor 9, Attack 9, Blackout 9, Exploit 9, Stealth 9 and Track 9].

Weapons:

Hamerli 620S [Light pistol, DV 6P/6S(e), AP 0/-half, SA, RC 1, 2 x 5(c), w/ additional clip, gecko grip, int. gas-vent, silencer, skinlink, int. smartgun, concealable holster and Armor-Piercing Flechette/Stick'n'Shock ammo]

MILES LANIER

B 5 (9) **A** 5 (9) **R** 5 (8) **S** 5 (9) **C** 4 **I** 6 **L** 7 **W** 6 **Edg** 7 **Ess** 2 **Init** 11 (14) **IP** 1 (4)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 11 (13)/11

Armor (B/I): 14/10

Skills: Architecture 3, Armorer 4, Athletics skill group 4 (7), Automatics (Assault Rifles) 3 (+2), Blades (Knives) 3 (+2), Clubs (Batons) 3 (+2), Cracking skill group 5, Demolitions 4, Dodge (Ranged) 4 (+2), Electronics skill group 5, Escape Artist 3, First Aid (Combat Wounds) 4 (+2), Gunnery 3, Heavy Weapons 3, Influence skill group 4, Intimidation 6, Locksmith 3, Longarms 7 (Sniper Rifles +2), Outdoors skill group 4, Perception 6 (9), Pilot Aircraft 3, Pilot Ground Craft 3, Pistols (Semi-Automatics) 6 (+2), Security Design 6, Stealth skill group 6, Throwing Weapons 3, Unarmed Combat (Boxing) 5 (+2).

Knowledge Skills: Baseball 5, Business 3, Economics 3, Engineering 3, Law 3, Magic Theory 6, Matrix Theory 6, Military Tactics 6, NeoNET 6, Parazoology 4, Poison Antidotes 3, Renraku 3, Security Procedures 6, Security Theory 6, English N, Japanese 6

Qualities: Aptitude (Longarms), Guts, Exceptional Attribute (Logic), Magic Resistance (Rating 2), Martial Arts (Boxing, +2 DV on Unarmed Combat attacks), Toughness, Will to Live (Rating 2).

Augmentations (all deltaware): Bone Density Augmentation (Rating 4), Damage Compensators (Rating 6), Datajack, Genewipe, Low-Light Vision Retinal Modification, Muscle Replacement (Rating 4), Orthoskin (Rating 2), Platelet Factories, Smartlink Retinal Modification, Synaptic Booster (Rating 3), Synthacardium (Rating 3), Toxin Extractor (Rating 6).

Gear: Area jammer (Rating 10), B&E bag [with autopicker (Rating 6), chisel, electronics toolkit, grapple gun (w/ 100m stealth rope and catalyst stick), maglock passkey (Rating 6), maglock sequencer, miniwelder, thermite burning bar, wire clippers], contacts [Rating 3 w/ flare compensation, image link, and vision enhancement (Rating 3)], custom commlink (Rating 9,

w/ biometric reader, satellite link, skinlink, subdermal microphone), directional jammer (Rating 10), FFBA Full Suit, gas mask, goggles [Rating 6, w/ flare compensation, thermographic, ultrasound, vision enhancement (Rating 3), vision magnification], handheld sensor [Signal 3, w/ cyberware scanner (Rating 6)], MAD Scanner (Rating 6), and Olfactory Sensor (Rating 6)], medkit (Rating 6), microphone [Rating 6, with Audio enhancement (Rating 3), select sound filter (Rating 2), spatial recognizer], micro-transceiver (Rating 6), plasteel restraints, rappelling gloves, Red Sox 1906 World Series Ring, slap patches [5 x stimulant patches (Rating 6), 5 x tranq patches (Rating 10), one trauma patch], SecureTech PPP System (forearm guards, leg and arm casings, shin guards, and vitals protector), 20 x security tags, 20 x stealth tags, survival kit, Synergist Business Line Longcoat (w/ Chemical Protection 6, Fire Resistance 6, Insulation 6, Nonconductivity 6, Thermal Damping 6)

Programs: Analyze 9, Browse 9, Command 9, Edit 9, Encrypt 9, Scan 9, Biofeedback Filter 9, Decrypt 9, ECCM 9, Sniffer 9, Offensive Agent [Rating 9, with Armor 9, Attack 9, Exploit 9, Decrypt 9, Spoof 9, Stealth 9], IC Agent [Rating 9, with Armor 9, Attack 9, Blackout 9, Medic 9, Stealth 9, Track 9].

Maneuvers: Finishing Move, Set Up.

Weapons:

Punch [Reach 0, DV 10P, AP 0]

Ares Predator IV [Heavy Pistol, DV 5P, AP -5, SA, RC 1, 19(c), w/ advanced safety (electro shocker), extended clip, melee hardening, personalized grip, silencer, skinlink, smartgun, concealable holster, and APDS ammo]

Ares Desert Strike [Sniper rifle, DV 8P, AP -9, SA, RC 1(2), 14(c) w/ easy breakdown, electronic firing, imaging scope, improved range finder, silencer, skinlink, shock pad, ext. smartgun, and anti-tank rounds]

HK G12A4m [Assault rifle, DV 8P, AP -2, SA/BF/FA, RC 2(3), 32(c), w/ gas-vent 2, electronic firing, high power chambering, skinlink, sound suppressor, ext. smartgun, underbarrel shotgun and high power rounds]

Underbarrel Shotgun [Shotgun, DV 9P(f), AP +5, SA, RC (1), 5(m), flechette ammo]



THE PRESTIGE

BY RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN AND JAMES D. MEIERS

Rory knew that she wasn't actually staying at the suite, but for politeness' sake they played as if she did. Thorn waited in the hallway for a tick before Corinna smiled and invited him in. He complimented her on how comfortable and spacious the room looked and that sort of thing. Politeness was a game, and it was right and proper that he should go through the motions.

"Sure and that's a marvelous picture, too." He'd dressed and colored himself like Michael Carter again, but once he saw the white noise generator humming away on a Brazilian cherry coffee table, he dropped the public school Brit accent and slid back into his comfortable Irish lilt. Thorn nodded to one wall of her suite's living room, enveloped as it was in a massive tridscreen display of evening programming.

"It's just the news," she said idly, swiping a negligent hand across the sensors built into the wall, muting it but leaving it on. Talking heads kept talking and neither of them listened, so she turned away from it to regard him again. "A ridiculous number of channels available, and not a thing worth watching."

"Oh, there's plenty worth watching in this room," he said through a little smile, winking playfully. She was in the same suit as before, but the Zoé tailoring seemed to be a slightly different cut—something more restrained, but still tailored for her curves. As Nadja Daviar clones went, she was one worth looking at.

"Plenty to watch, and plenty to talk about, as well." Corinna's arms crossed, and she arched a brow at him. And there went the pleasantries. Business time. "All nineteen, Mr. Carter?"

"Oh, Rory's fine. Mr. Caolain if you want to sound formal," he said with a shrug and a nod at the anti-surveillance device he'd

already noted. He was sure the room held more of them, and the knowledge made him relax enough that his hair began to change color. In a span of heartbeats, his cool blue eyes had turned the green of fresh-cut grass, and his pale blond hair had gone black-Irish. "So long as you keep your little doo-dads on, I'll thank you not to call me an Englishman's name."

Her pointedly arched brow didn't lower, and her question still hung heavy in the air.

"Oh, and yes, all nineteen." He threw his hands up, fighting a grin even as he explained himself. "You read over the files before sending 'em to me, I'm sure. It's not my fault Kanagawa sent his security detail out in six little three-man teams, for Christ's sake. You have your patrols working in bite-sized crews like that, an' it's no one's fault but yours when I come by an' kill 'em all."

"We were under the impression that your interest in Mr. Kanagawa was professional, not personal, Mr. Caolain." Her arms stayed crossed, her tone dissatisfied. Behind her, the news program's talking heads just kept moving their lips with nothing worth hearing coming out.

"Aye. That was the impression I wanted to give." Rory shrugged, unapologetic. Behind his glasses, his green eyes turned hard and sharp as emeralds as he remembered a Russian winter spent in misery and anger, and why he'd had to endure it. "I owed him, and I took it out on his men as my way to take it out on him. I'd do it again if I could."

She scowled through his answer, but her fine features softened at his final proclamation.

"Would you? Do it again, if you could?"

"Shedim notwithstanding," he said with a quirked eyebrow, "as a general rule, you only get to do that sort of thing once per person."



“Not him,” she said ignoring his joke. “Not him precisely. But others like him. Ones you might not have the same personal motivation for approaching, but for whom financial motivation might be offered ...”

“Haven’t you heard, lass? It’s all over Puzzle Palace and the other trendy shadowrunner boards. I’m retired.”

“Mr. Kanagawa and eighteen of his employees would disagree.” She smirked.

“Ah. You’re asking just how retired I am, in other words?”

“And if I was?”

He answered with a sigh.

“Mr. Caolain, I represent certain parties who understand your worth and who are willing to provide you with the information and support you would need in order to keep...”

“Killing folks?” He scowled.

“Solving problems.”

“By killing folks,” he said with a nod. “Miss, I understand you came into this confused about my motivation, but I want to make it perfectly clear. I hated Kanagawa. He and I hated each other from the moment he picked me up from the Kobe airport twelve years ago, because his employer wanted me for a job she didn’t trust to him alone.”

“Miss Kanematsu?”

“Don’t be coy. You know full well who he handled security for, or you wouldn’t have given me a green light and a dossier.” His face was serious, his earlier laughter gone. She, too, was businesslike. Politician smooth. Along with something that wasn’t quite the same...

“So are you saying, Mr. Caolain, that it was personal motivation alone that sent you after Kanagawa? That you aren’t willing to engage in this sort of activity again?”

He stared past her at bland-featured newscasters and old B-roll being intercut on the trid as he mulled over her question.

“I’m saying,” he eventually answered, “that I don’t particularly want to solve problems, but I don’t know what else I’m good at. I don’t know how else to make up for the things I’ve done. Kanagawa was a bloody arsehole,

and he betrayed me a long time ago. When MET 2000 fucked up me laying low, and I heard Kanagawa was in DeeCee, I figured I might as well take a drive and go for him.”

“Just like that?” She wasn’t scowling or glaring any more, but appeared genuinely curious. “Travel through two countries to kill a man?”

“Three, actually. I took a rather indirect route, rode a good bit more than the crow flies. But, aye. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Because I didn’t have anything better to do, he had it coming, and what’s one more, really?”

“Nineteen more, actually.”

“Drops.” He shrugged. “A few more drops in a very big bucket.”

“Speaking of MET 2000, Mr. Caolain, and that unpleasantness in Denver with your previous employer ...” Her sentence ended with an inquisitive lift in her tone. It was half a question, half a demand for information.

“Not worth worrying about, truly, miss. There were only sixteen of them.” He shrugged, leaning into the new turn of conversation as smoothly as he would a twisting road on his bike. “It was just a mid-level bastard who’s always hated me calling in favors and scrambling a few kill teams. A few washed-up old officers, a junkie for a mage. They were trimming the roster as much as anything else. It wasn’t a proper Argus op.”

“You’re certain there won’t be further entanglements?”

“Likely not. But then, who’s certain of anything, really?” He shrugged philosophically. “Like I said, though, it wasn’t really Argus, and they didn’t really want me. If they did, they would’ve sent another agent after me, not some infantry knuckleheads and a single half-mage. You know those MET two-kay boys, aye? Bloody worthless outside their tanks. No big deal.”

“Sixteen assault troopers, one of them an aspected spellcaster, might be considered a big deal.”

“To some. To me, it was just an irritated Major back in Hanover who thought he had a chance to get me back, who used some dull tools for the job. If Argus wanted me dead, well and truly dead, they’d send someone like me. It won’t ever be a squad of lads with heavy footsteps that does me in, I promise you that.”

"Argus has more men like you?"

"Oh, sure. Thousands of us, haven't you seen the commercials? And I trained every last one. There's Agent Thorn, of course, and then I went and taught everything I know to Splinter, Needle, Nail, Staple, Thumbtack, Safety Pin..."

She sighed and interrupted his list by standing and walking away. It was a relaxed stroll, and Thorn assumed he was supposed to follow her.

She walked into the suite dining room where a champagne flute sat, untouched. Keyed to her, the tridscreen images danced along the wall in her wake, following her faithfully from room to room. He wasn't sure if this was a psychological ploy on her part, or if she just felt better about the anti-eavesdropping measures in the windowless room. If this was a game, though, he was more than capable of playing along. She sat at the head of the table while Rory remained standing at the opposite end, his body positioned towards the wall of trideo newsfeeds.

Her expression did not change as he stood away from her. "Mr. Caolain, let me be clear. I'm trying to approach you with a serious offer of long-term intelligence and financial support. I'm not here for jokes."

He gave a jaunty little shrug, either as an apologetic gesture to show he was listening or a flippant one to show that he didn't care what she was there for. She took it as the former and continued.

"You know the business I'm in and the people I deal with. I can read men very, very, well. What you lack, Mr. Caolain, is very simple, and I'm here to give it to you." She tilted her head upwards just a shade, matching his gaze without fear despite knowing just how many lives he'd ended. "It isn't motivation you're missing, Rory. It's purpose. Direction."

His eyes did not break contact with hers.

"Sure and aren't we all?"

"Not in the slightest. I know exactly why I'm here, and exactly what I'm here to do."

"And do you know ..." he spoke slowly, carefully, eyes squarely on her to read her reaction. He pulled his wire-rimmed glasses off, tucked them into a jacket pocket as he got more serious. "Exactly who you are?"

That made her pause.

"Enlighten me." Her voice was flat, but she raised a curious eyebrow.

"You aren't Corinna. Your attitude is all wrong, body language is colder. Your heels are shorter and your dress is longer, despite this being a more private meeting. But it's more than an outfit change. Your posture is different, you don't arch your back quite like she did to exaggerate your chest. You've certainly got the build to use your sexuality, lass, don't take it as an insult, but you're not as quick to do so as she did. She'd be trying to seduce me right now, all alone up here in the bedroom."

As he talked, Rory began to tick differences off on his fingers.

"The eyes match perfectly, but not the lines around them. It's not age, no, so you're a natural elf, but yours are more like mine. A couple crow's feet. A few wee tiny lines to show that you squint and glare a bit, that you pay attention, and that you've done so much more than Corinna has. You've been in the game longer than her."

"Now, your accents are close, but both of them are faked. You've each cultivated the DC twang, and done a fine job of it. Start with a CAS drawl for all-American appeal, accentuate the clipped New England bits to imply political power, round it out with a hint of those long Canadian o's; all perfect, politician-bred, to make sure it appeals to a broad spectrum of UCAS voters. The difference is hers is native, yours is forced. There's something like Finnish hiding under yours, unless I miss my guess. Comes out in your v's when you're not careful."

"And Corinna is a bit harder in the eyes, too, and meaner around the mouth. She hides it well, don't get me wrong, but God's own truth? I think she might just hate every man she deals with. She manipulates us to show herself she can, and because she doesn't remember how

not to. You, though? No. You, I think, manipulate everyone. Man, woman, and whatever else crosses your path. And you don't do it because you hate who you're talking to. You do it because you need something from them."

Rory watched her shoulders as he spoke, the lines of her neck. Faces lied. It was the rest of the body that gave things away. He hadn't missed his guess.

"So you're not her. You're friendly enough for all that, your organization came through with the information and the tech support I needed to do my job, and everything went smoothly. I'm here, because part of the arrangement—on your end—was an insistence on a follow-up meeting. I'm not terribly concerned that you're not Corinna, but my curiosity's piqued."

When she still didn't deny it, still didn't speak at all, he continued.

"So then, having established who you weren't, I wondered who you were." Those miniscule lines he'd mentioned, the only hint of his true age, appeared around his eyes as he smiled. "It struck me as unlikely, women being territorial creatures every bit as much as men, that you'd be just another knock-off. No, no. Not just another clone, taking over on her debriefing, on her turf. Corinna's too much like a cat to let just another vat-job come along and take over a deal for her. But mostly? It was the trid that did it."

He nodded over towards the wall, where the trid still flickered away and lit the both of them in its glow. She stonily eyed him instead of following his gesture.

"Lovely things, newscasts. Whenever they're not letting you read lips, they're writing out exactly what's going on all along the bottom of the screen. Continuing chaos and upheavals in Dunkelzahn's pet organization, they say. Rumors and whispers about Foundation security in the wake of Chief Consultant Kanagawa's disappearance, they say. Assumptions that he fled back to Japan and left Midori high and dry, they say. Midori dangling in the boardroom, ripe for a power play, they say. Draco Foundation board shuffling all over in the wake of a certain someone's triumphant return and restructuring, they say."

Rory gave her a sunny smile.

"You know the trick to figuring out who hired an assassin, ma'am? It's easy. Know who's going to profit from the trigger being pulled. Kanagawa was the rug under Midori's dainty wee little feet, and snatching him away knocked her on her arse."

Her lips pursed. When they opened, in that split second between her taking in a breath to start talking and her actually speaking, he cut her off behind a wide smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Madame Vice President. Or do you prefer just 'Miss Daviar' these days?" He winked at her playfully.

Nadja smiled. "All right, let's talk. Please, have a seat." Rory walked to an armchair at her right hand and sat, while she leaned toward him. "My offer is genuine, Rory. I have a specific plan for what I need to do, but I cannot pursue my goals with people like Kanagawa or some of the board members in my way."

"I do not have the capacity for violence that others have. Not hard men like yourself, of course, but also not those people like Kanematsu and Dupree who are comfortable with issuing the orders that send men and women to die like they were chess pieces."

Rory watched her eyes and her measured inflection, and he could tell that she had something in mind. "Aye, but at the same time, you were the head of the foundation and the vice president for ... what? Seven years? Eight? Sure and you've had to make those same calls a time or two."

"Indeed. That is my point. As much as I do not have a taste for it, I am not going to pretend that your particular brand of violence is going to disappear. It is a necessary evil to make this world function. In this particular case, Corinna let me know that you were headed this way and

pursuing vengeance against Mr. Kanagawa, and that you were doing so for the same sort of acts that had upset me concerning his position within my foundation.”

“You mean Dunkelzahn’s foundation, of course.” Rory fought a smile.

“Dunkelzahn is dead,” Nadja said with a voice hardened in a way that Rory understood perfectly. He stopped smiling. “I seem to be the only person to truly understand that our actions are his legacy. It is not what we think he wanted that matters, but what we do with what he left us.”

“I hope you now understand my concern about some of your violence. I approve of your action against Kanagawa, but I am not entirely comfortable with the collateral effect. We can discuss just-war theory and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas all day, but suffice it to say that I am intent on minimizing collateral damage in the future. That is something that Dunkelzahn insisted upon, and a goal I continue to seek.”

Rory leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands steepled, listening. Intent. Focused. “Leaving aside for a moment that I know just the sort of men Kanagawa had working his personal security detail, why me? What about your lad Mercury? Or the rest of that army of operatives you keep up those tailored sleeves of yours?”

“Ryan has his own path to follow, and that path is tied intrinsically into another effect of Dunkelzahn’s legacy. The Watchers that are amenable to a new way are also still known for being tied to that network. Even these clones of mine have only a limited value. They’re mercenaries, and they don’t necessarily have much regard for me—for obvious reasons.”

“Fair enough, then. What’s your actual pitch?”

“Come work for me, and we can change the world. In the last twenty years the world has been allowed a certain amount of new opportunities, but the fact is that increases in efficiency and comfort are not synonymous with freedom and advancing humanity. It’s time for that to change. What is worse, and what I hope to impress upon you through your long history of siding with the underdog, is that things are coming back around.”

“Horizon is a perfect example. It does good work, but like the Draco Foundation it is a large institution that has people in it acting in hostile ways, doing things that I would rather not see. Moreover, people have become so suspicious of the concept of corporate social responsibility that many of them are just waiting to see some ‘true face’ appear from behind this façade. The fact that it’s a media producer is an inherent liability, since an entity based on shaping and manipulating reality for its own ends, and the ends of its clients, is suspicious, at least to those who know how the world works.

“It’s time for a page to turn, Mr. Caolain. You can step up and help it happen, or you can sit on the sidelines and watch others do the heavy lifting.”

Her smile was stunning, brilliant, radiant. She held a hand out to him, not just for the symbolic handshake, but to make him lean even more toward her, to change his position both physically and mentally.

“From reading your files, Rory, I know that you’d rather have a more active role than that.”

She knew she had him. His psych profiles and work history had him in her clutches before she’d even started talking. He was hers, now, in part because he had nothing better to do and no one better to do it for, and also because hers was an attractive offer to a man of action. He would do what she wanted him to do, right up to the moment that he—simply, suddenly—wouldn’t. Her job, then, was to get the most out of him while she held his attention. They shook on it, and a page turned in the killer’s history.



After Rory left, Nadja remained in the suite. She entered the bedroom and closed the double doors behind her. She sat down at the foot of the bed, straightening her suit out and closing her eyes. She began to center herself, focusing all of her magical energies into a single purpose to create a mental “game map.” She focused on her breathing, slowly inhaling and exhaling in rhythm, as a vast array of mental nodes appeared in her mind’s eye where her magical abilities gave each memory/thought node a richness of information unknown to even the most brilliant of mundane minds. The nodes began to arrange themselves into an almost endless web, changing color and size to represent the type and importance of the person each one represented.

Standing at the center of the three-dimensional sphere of influence, the brain and heart at the center of the web, Nadja selected a blue dot that was connected to a half-dozen different interconnected, overlapping nodes. It represented Rory, and she brought him closer, creating a direct link between the spy and herself, bypassing the Nadjas, the Watchers, allies at JackPoint, her connections in Argus, and the various second- and third-tier connections that surrounded them.

He would be a valuable asset if he could maintain the necessary amount of discretion. If he was kept on a leash of the right length, she knew she could count on his services almost indefinitely. The trick, Corinna’s files assured her, would be to find the perfect amount of freedom to afford him. She took the advice for what it was worth. Her clones didn’t always have the proper perspective, which made sense since they were otherwise normal people with a flawed psychological profile imprinted onto them. She knew about the rumors of the one in Seattle, Natalia, being a slaver on the side, and the one in Madrid, Irina, with ties to Aztechnology. None of that mattered at the moment, though. She trusted them just enough.

In her mind, Nadja pushed out everything in her vast constellation of plots, actors, machinery, programs, and so forth, everything but a handful of orbs, including Rory’s. She plucked one from the inky blackness and placed it directly ahead of her. It was white, so white it had a blue sheen to it, and it rippled with scales. A second orb appeared behind the white one and to the right. It was blue on the bottom and red on the top. That particular orb had a feather-like texture. A third orb appeared in front and right of the white orb. This one was a sphere of pure platinum. Another orb appeared between her and the feathered orb, a swirling mess of red, blue, green, white, and yellow. A yellowish orb appeared behind and beneath the white sphere, and it shone brightly. More orbs appeared before her. Once she was done, orbs began to appear behind her: green, blue, and silver, iridescent purple, brass, grey, red, and one of swirling shades of white, blue, green, and other hues.

Once completed, Nadja Daviar had assembled what was effectively a three-dimensional chess board of runners, fixers, CEOs, politicians, lawyers, and assorted actors distilled from a much larger logistical cloud. But this was not chess; it was not a game of any kind.

Directly above her mental avatar, a large royal blue orb hovered. She looked up at it and focused. She reached out and grabbed the orb, holding it in her hands as a rush of emotions attempted to overwhelm her. Focusing with all of her will, Nadja centered herself. Holding the orb tightly, it began to fade in intensity and hue, and particles flowed away from it. She fought the disintegrating orb with a burning intensity until there was nothing left. When it was gone, she took stock of her mental playing field and again centered herself on the orbs surrounding her.

Nadja smiled as she opened her eyes. The elf watched the muted trid display recapping the day’s big events, and her smile grew with the thought of how her planning would soon come to fruition.

“This is how it’s going to be.”

THE TALES WE'LL TELL TOMORROW

BY BRANDIE TARVIN

September 16th, 2072

Ray Simon stepped out of his private plane and onto the tarmac of the Denver International Airport. The mountain wind picked up his graying braids, tossing them around in random directions. He took a moment to breathe in the scents of the city, frowning at the corruption he sensed. Before he could comment, his youngest son Oak tumbled down the ramp, absorbed by the AR game he had been playing this entire trip.

"Clouds-in-Eyes," Ray said.

"Yes, sir?" The troll secretary tottered down the ramp, stepping on the outside of his own feet. His wrinkled hands shook, his horns constantly shed, both signs of old age.

Ray sighed and wondered when the man would retire. Clouds-in-Eyes was one of the original Goblinization victims and couldn't be long for this world. "Take Oak in hand, will you?"

Clouds-in-Eyes nodded and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder.

Ray turned and made his way to a small hangar. Standing inside the bay door, shaded by the hanger's roof, stood three Truth Dancers. By the style of their shamans' garb—brown leather pants, loose leather tops, beaded boots, and bone ornaments—they were Blackfoot. Decorated feathers sprouted from their hair, or might have been their hair. Ray couldn't tell. Garish paint striped their faces, making it impossible for him to read their true gender.

The Truth Dancers inclined their heads, a sign of respect for Ray's position on the Sovereign Tribal Council. Ray, in turn, pressed his hands together and bent in a partial bow as a sign of respect for their office. Truth Dancers could be vicious enemies. The strength of their magic could rip the truth from a man's mind, which gave them an immense amount of power in the NAN. A Truth Dancer's word could make or break a man, and if they lied about what they found, only another Truth Dancer would ever know.

So Ray accorded them every respect due to a stranger, even though these Truth Dancers and he were kin of the tightest kind—blood and tribe and shared culture.

"You asked for our help," the middle shaman spoke in tenor tones.

Ray glanced over his shoulder. Clouds-in-Eyes had guided Oak to the corner of the hangar where the boy could play his annoying RPG in peace. Satisfied, he returned his attention to the Dancers. "I did. Roger Soaring Owl is in Denver. Find him. Question him. Reveal him for what he is."

The left-most shaman canted his—her?—head. "You have long suspected him of selling Sioux secrets to Ares."

Before Ray could respond, the right-most shaman cut in with a low voice that sounded like ground glass. "No. Of selling secrets to the UCAS government. A far worse offense."

Ray nodded. "Yes. And I wish him exposed as a traitor."

"And if he is not?" the middle shaman asked.

"Oh, he is," Ray assured her. Him.

Ray clenched his fist. He wished they would introduce themselves. Custom, traditional, and political tact demanded that he allow them to remain anonymous if they so wished. Truth Dancers were the backbone of the NAN intelligence machine, a law unto themselves. They kept their names and faces secret for a reason. They were harder to compromise if someone didn't know whom to blackmail or bribe.

The shamans did not react to Ray's frustration. They did, however, nod to each other, as if speaking through a mind net.

The right-most shaman looked back to Ray. "We will track down Soaring Owl. You will stay in Denver until our assignment is completed. We will report to you at that time."

Relief released the tension in Ray's shoulders. "Thank you."

"Do not thank us yet," the left-most shaman replied. "There is much work to be done. And if Soaring Owl is innocent of the charges you lay against him, you will be required to publicly apologize and renounce your vendetta."

Ray raised his chin and gave a sharp nod. "I understand. Don't worry. Roger himself will give you all the proof you need."

"We shall see," the Truth Dancers chorused.

As they took their leave, Clouds-in-Eyes walked up, pushing Oak ahead of him. "How did it go, sir?"

"Excellent. The Dancers will rip every secret Roger has ever had out of his mind and leave him a useless husk of a person. Which reminds me, Clouds-in-Eyes, did you hire that hacker yet?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, just this morning, a friend of mine heard Jan Drysik mention a rumor of an upcoming private auction. Apparently, Roger Soaring Owl has every intent of selling his former employer's secrets to the highest bidder."

Ray snorted. "Excellent. Put together the auction details and irrefutable proof that Roger is behind it."

Clouds-in-Eyes nodded. Oak's arms flung out into the air, his hands fiddling with invisible gears and levers.

Ray sighed, shaking his head at his youngest. "I know that boy

has more magical talent than an MIT&T grad student, even if the shamans disagree. And he chooses to pollute his mind with that AR nonsense. Remind me to cut off his Matrix account when we return home. Maybe if he can't login, he'll actually accomplish something in his magic lessons."

"Yes, sir. I shall."



The O'Hare Aerospaceport rumbled like a giant, ponderous beast. Its corridors hummed with activity and conversation as individuals and small groups of people scurried along. Some carried luggage, others pushed loaders full of cargo. Still more sat down for a brief lunch at one of the airport's collection of restaurants. Damien himself sat in one of the more luxurious eateries, Dom Pierre, watching the wildlife go by and calculating what it would take to make them move in the directions he wanted them to move in, at the pace he set.

He drummed his fingers against his thigh, a nervous habit he had developed in basic training over seventy years ago. He caught himself short, flattening both palm and digits to still the movement. His visit to the O'Hare Unlimitech facility had been both frustrating and exciting. So many possibilities, so many problems.

Roger would know how to solve the problems. He was an organizational genius.

"Mr. Knight?" Damien's escort, a middle-aged Sioux by the name of Captain Tyler Climbing-Bear, asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, son." Damien distracted his hand by grabbing the glass of pinot and taking a sip. "Tell me, Tyler. Why have you stayed with Knight Errant when so many of your fellows have resigned from the company?"

Tyler leaned back against the wall, eyeing the restaurant's patrons. "Well, it's a lot of things, Mr. Knight. Job security, steady paycheck, knowing I'm surrounded by friends who've got my back in messy situations."

"And what do you say about the things you saw in Unlimitech today?"

Tyler chewed his bottom lip for a moment, then shrugged. "I can't rightly recollect that I saw anything, Mr. Knight. In fact, I don't believe that noticing things is part of my job description."

Damien barked a harsh laugh. "You're in the security business, son. If I recall, you're the captain of a Firewatch team. Noticing things is the central focus of your job description."

"Yessir. But sticking my nose in company politics and company projects isn't. I'm not so far down the totem pole that I have that kind of clout."

Frowning at the reference, Damien took another sip of his drink. After he swallowed,



he decided to correct his escort. “Low man on the totem pole is a reference to a peon or a minion.”

“Begging your pardon, but that white man’s reference is in error. In tribes that use totem poles, the low man on the totem pole is the most powerful, and the most revered, of all. It’s the highest face that has the least influence.”

“Really?” Damien swirled his glass and watched bubbles chase each other across the surface. Now to see how far loyalty could be taken. “Apparently, I still have things to learn. Tell me, Tyler, if I offered you and your squad a special assignment, would you take it?”

“You’re the boss, Mr. Knight. We’d do whatever you asked us to.”

“And if I offered you access to the biotech, armor, and weapons, being developed by Unlimitech? Solely to protect yourselves from the danger you’d encounter on this mission, of course.”

The bait dangled, Damien didn’t even look at the man. He just sat and sipped, imagining the hesitation in Tyler’s eyes. Did the captain’s expression change? Damien could almost taste Tyler’s instinctive avarice warring with his fear. The captain had been present when the walls went up in Chicago, but he hadn’t been in Chicago actual. He didn’t have the same phobias as Roger had, or the same mule-headed stubbornness. Tyler’s response would inform Damien’s plans for unveiling the new tech. An adverse reaction meant the tech’s origins wouldn’t be disseminated.

Of course, Damien would have to dispose of Captain Climbing-Bear if he refused this opportunity. It wouldn’t due to have any loose ends that might go finding their way back to Roger.

“As I said,” Tyler replied, without so much as a quiver in his voice. “You’re the boss.”

Damien drained his glass with a grin. “Very well, captain. Call your squad to O’Hare. We have some prep work to take care of.”



September 21st, 2072

Screams filled the airwaves. Good men and women died at the claws of a seething pile of giant insects. Bugs were everywhere, crushing, killing, ripping asunder.

The ceiling of his apartment ripped upward, caught in the jaws of a hundred meter high roach. The sound he heard, though, was the metal tear of van roof. The roach looked down at him, throwing the roof aside.

Roger Soaring Owl turned, searching for an escape. Bugs blocked every entrance, every exit. The window glass rippled and became millions of tiny spiders, each growing to gigantic proportions as they jumped to the ground. He started running, but though his legs moved, he stayed in one place.

Then the earth tilted sideways. The sky moved, and Roger was running freely, even though he flew.

He pushed back against the cushions of the airplane’s seat, and moist scents of sweat and fear filled his nostrils. None of the other passengers seemed to be paying the attention to him, but Roger knew better. He remembered the surprised glances when he had boarded, the surreptitious sub-vocal communication as he took his seat, the shifting of feet and too-obvious sudden interest in AR feeds. Most of them had recognized his face.

His armored leather jacket lay draped across the empty chair beside him, shiny patches where once Knight Errant badges and his

nametag resided, a remnant of a life he once held dear—still held dear—and could not surrender. A drink, amber whiskey with half-melted ice, dripped on his tray. A package of peanut butter crackers lay beside the glass, unopened.

Roger swallowed, trying to remember how he had gotten here, wondering where the roach had gone. He fingered the cracker package, felt the plastic under his touch. Had he fallen asleep on the plane?

A memory surfaced. Filing a vacation plan with Ares HR as he stopped a suborbital to Denver on O’Hare’s runway. Jumping the plane without ticket, luggage, or explanation, and ordering the pilot to take off. That had happened. That was real.

An analog clock ticked away, the noise snapping him free of the memory. Roger stared at his tray. Condensation crept along the side of the glass, gathering moisture as it tumbled, a slow-motion tear that finally separated from the glass and plinked into the puddle beneath. The puddle subsumed the tear, destroying it through absorption.

“You were my always my favorite, Roger,” a familiar voice spoke in wistful tones. “Then you betrayed me.”

Roger looked up, saw Damien Knight, CEO of Ares Corporation and Roger’s once-best friend, sitting in the seat beside him. That wasn’t right. Damien hadn’t been on the flight from Chicago. “I didn’t betray you.”

“You quit, left me alone to manage Ares and Knight Errant. How is that not a betrayal?”

“I took a vacation, Damien, to clear my head. You chose to fire me while I was gone. On national television, no less. You fired and replaced me with that bastard Clayton Wilson.”

Damien chuckled. “That bastard will do what I tell him to, when I tell him to do it. Not like you. He’ll take Knight Errant to heights you could never imagine, let alone accomplish.”

“Don’t trust him, Damien. He’ll use the leverage you give him to get his company back.”

“And then Ares will own both Lone Star and Knight Errant.”

Roger snorted. “I’m trying to warn you—”

“And I’m warning you, Roger Soaring Owl.” Damien’s voice sharpened. “First you walk out on me when I need you the most, then you offer my trade secrets up on the open market. I am not a man that appreciates betrayal. You have two choices. Come back to Ares willingly or be hunted down like the dirty dog you are.”

Roger reached out to Damien, only to encounter empty air. His mind registered the silent snap of dissipating magic as he lurched upright in his bed. The sheets wrapped around his clammy legs, and cold sweat beaded the back of his neck. Denver’s ever-present light pollution glowed behind the window shades, throwing quirky shadows against the walls.

He panted in noiseless panic, working to wrap his mind around what just happened. He had been the target of enough mages that he recognized a dream spell when he felt one. Ares’ mages must have used the ritual sample Roger had on file as part of his employment record, breaking into his recurring nightmare to leave Damien’s message.

He cracked an inadvertent laugh, unsure whether to be grateful for the interruption or not. His hands shook as he released the comforter from his rictus grip.

When his heart rate calmed, Roger stepped into the shower to sluice himself off. There was no getting back to sleep after that

threat. Damien, or his proxies, would be coming to Denver with the express purpose of extracting Roger back to Detroit. As Roger washed away his nighttime terrors, he considered the alternative. The team would have backup orders. If they couldn't extract him, they would kill him.

Grimacing, Roger shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. He had only been in Denver a week. That wasn't enough time to cultivate contacts and other trustworthy resources. He wasn't eager to use shadowrunners, but he didn't have too many other options. He could involve the Sioux military forces or OMI, but if he gave Sinopa that opening, she would peel his head open like a ripe tangelo.

He grabbed a disposable commlink and dialed up a private number he had gotten off a strung-out shadowrunner last year. He waited for the number to ring through, hoping it was what the runner had claimed it to be: a direct line to the Denver Nexus.

His agent traced the signal, noting each node it went through on its journey. According to the list scrolling across the ARO, the call went around the world twice, and once up to Z-O, before coming back to Roger's own apartment.

Roger hesitated, then realized the line was open and it wasn't actually reconnected back to his 'link.

"I'm calling for SilveryK to talk about a research job. I need reliable, subtle, and discreet. It pays ten thousand, half up front. If the intel is good, there's the possibility of future work. Call me." He added his contact info to the message header and sent it off.

If the Nexus was as good as he had heard, he expected to hear back within the hour.

Fifteen minutes later, the commlink pinged. SilveryK was online and willing to chat. Roger poured himself a whiskey, sat down in his armchair, and stepped into a private chat room.

SilveryK's icon, a silver rain of glitter, rippled. "You rang?"

"Thank you for calling back. I need someone capable of tapping into Ares' communications grid."

The glitter rain paused. "You don't ask for much, do you?" The glitter shimmered light red in apparent sarcasm.

"The Nexus has a reputation for getting information otherwise impossible to obtain. Are you telling me that reputation is undeserved?"

The glitter quivered. "No, I'm not. All right, sweetheart. What sort of comm traffic are you looking for?"

"Anything mentioning me."

Something in the glitter changed, as part of the falling cascade arched upward. "Current? Old? Give me a timeline."

"Anything from the past week up through the next couple of days."

SilveryK's glitterfall danced, and the dickering began. When they settled on a mutually acceptable price, Roger transferred half the fee to her account. He signed off and took a swallow of his whiskey. The icy smooth sweetness slid down his throat, taking away the bitter taste in his mouth.

At that point, his real, and much more secure, commlink pinged. Roger checked the ID and let out a groan. Much as he wanted to ignore it, he didn't dare. As Director of the Office of Military Intelligence, the woman probably had his apartment wired and watched. Knowing her, she'd monitored his apartment's PAN and knew the instant he had gotten up. She probably also knew he had showered and gotten a drink.

Roger opened the connection. A dark Lakota beauty with radiant eyes stared back at him. "Sinopa."

"Soaring Owl," she replied. Saccharine dripped from her voice. "You've been a bad boy."

Guilt stabbed through him, but he managed to keep a straight face and a steady voice. She couldn't know about his contact with the Nexus, not yet. He hadn't even made the decision to call until just a bit ago. "You'll have to forgive me. I just woke up and my mind's a little fuzzy. Could you be a little more specific?"

"Don't play dumb, Soaring Owl. It doesn't suit you. For the better part of a year, since the military agreed to hire you as a consultant, you've refused to share your Knight Errant intel with us. I get it. You've been with KE for a long time and you feel a certain obligation to protect the people who worked under you. I respected you for that. Until tonight."

Roger scratched his head. "And what changed tonight?" Even with the Nexus routing precautions, he half expected her to comment on his conversation with SilveryK.

"Tonight OMI gets wind through back door channels that you're offering up this information to the international intelligence community in a private auction."

Roger's mouth went dry. He swallowed his shock.

Sinopa acted as if she didn't even notice. "You want to tell me what the hell's going on? Or do I get to invite you into a session with my favorite interrogators?"

"I signed a contract, Sinopa. Took an oath. Knight Errant intelligence is off the table. It's proprietary company information that I am not allowed to discuss. I'm not selling any of it."

"Really? Then let me send you the chatter we've picked up. You can explain it to me, General Running Deer, and the STC rep tomorrow morning at eleven."

Roger sat up. "STC rep? Why one of them and not a member of the Council of Chiefs?"

"Oh, haven't you heard?" The saccharine sting found its way back into Sinopa's voice. "The man visiting Denver happens to be the Sioux representative to the Sovereign Tribal Council. He's here to stage an intervention on your behalf. I believe he's an old childhood chum of yours. The name Ray Simon ring any bells?"

Cold wormed its way into Roger's belly, stopping his heart, freezing his soul. He felt the blood drain from his face. "Shit."

An ARO opened up in his peripheral vision. *Encrypted Download complete. Open file Y/N?*

"The Eagle's Nest, tomorrow at eleven. Try to be prompt, Soaring Owl. Tardiness would reflect poorly on you."

The connection cut off. Roger stayed in his armchair, sipping his whiskey and ignoring the blinking message. By the time the glass was dry, he'd managed to collect himself. He decrypted and read Sinopa's file while he dressed, his anger building the further along he got.

"Hell. No wonder Damien's pissed."

Roger debated calling back SilveryK, then discarded the notion. Depending on the shadows for assistance was like asking a total stranger to sneak up and slit his throat. The job he asked of SilveryK was passive information gathering. This was different. If any runners caught wind that he was selling information on KE, he would be an instant target. His former KE colleagues were much more trustworthy, but if he requested their assistance, he would be putting their heads on Damien Knight's chopping block.

And he wouldn't do that to them.

Which only left one person. Ray Simon.

The adrenaline rush he had woken up with had yet to dissipate, leaving him more than enough energy at two o'clock in the morning to do what he always did when he needed to clear his head. Find a shooting range and indulge in a bit of target practice.

So, Roger holstered his modified Ares Predator, dropped a couple of extra ammo clips in his pockets, and slipped on his armored jacket. He shut down the apartment's network, locking the door behind him. His AR display gave him a list of nearby ranges, with directions, hours, and coupons for weapon discounts.

Roger chose one in the middle, a small place in the Hub known for catering to the international crowd. The map came up in his display, with an offer of an auto-taxi to protect him from the chill drizzle that had permeated the city all day long. Declining the offer, Roger turned up his collar and he chose to walk the distance. His clothes had been waterproofed. A little rain wouldn't make him melt.

The map route took him down two hills and up another. The brisk workout put a pleasant strain on his calf muscles.

Light traffic hummed along the road, splashing through puddles as they zoomed by. He spotted a car here, a truck there, with large gaps of nothing between. The sidewalks were empty of pedestrian traffic with only the occasional wet dog or raccoon scurrying around. Roger frowned. Every city he had ever been in had a nightlife. If nothing else, he expected to see the local non-desirables running around.

A Joy Cola truck drove by, ping-ponging for active PANs. Without warning, a sexy model appeared in his vision using a cola can to cool her cleavage. "Avert your thirst. Buy Joy Cola."

Irritated, Roger shut down the ad. As if that were some sort of signal, every passing truck and every storefront he walked by suddenly threw ads in his direction.

"Pesky plumbing problems? Stop by the Sock-n-Wrench. We've got what you need to clean your pipes."

"Make her feel like a real woman. Buy custom-cut diamonds at half the cost, but all the value."

"The Denver *Daily News*, your one-stop shop for everything Denver."

Annoyed, he turned his PAN to passive mode just in time to see two armed and armored women step up to him. He tensed, prepared for a fight.

"SIN and travel license, please," the taller woman, an elf, asked.

The shorter, human woman eyed his jacket. "Weapons license, too."

He examined their rain gear, military coats over their tan uniforms, ZDF patches displayed on their arms. Their hip holsters held covered Walther PB-120s, and they each carried an Ares Crusader in their hands. The way they stood—feet planted solidly on the ground, shoulders relaxed, heads level, and hands light and confident on their Crusaders—told him their story. Only professionally trained military had that body language.

The tension drained from his muscles, and he loaded his SIN and weapons license into their PANs. "What's a travel license?"

The shorter woman snorted. "Your reason for being out past curfew. Are you really trying to pass yourself off as Roger Soaring Owl? Idiot. If you want to spoof someone, at least pick a persona no one knows about. Your nanopaste disguise is horrible."

The elf tapped her partner's shoulder, a frown stretching across her expressive features. A subvocalized conversation ensued, with the short woman getting angry, then paling in response. The two women turned back to him.

"My apologies, Mr. Soaring Owl," the elf replied. "There are a lot of people in Denver pretending to be someone they're not. We had to verify your identity."

"I understand," he said, feeling somewhat reassured by the elf's diligence.

"You're new to Denver, sir, so we'll let this slide tonight. For future reference, Ghostwalker has implemented a citywide curfew. If you don't want to get stopped or arrested, you need a legitimate business reason to be traveling the streets at night. You should be able to get an exemption from the Sioux Sector government."

Roger nodded, his wet hair dripping into his eyes. "I'll look into it." He sighed as the women moved off on their patrol, shaking his head in sudden disappointment.

"Almost Knight Errant worthy," he muttered, continuing on his way. "Until you decided to let me go. Who trains you people?"

Sector Security let him through the Sioux border, though they gave his credentials a far more thorough examination than the ZDF patrol had. On the UCAS side of the crossing, one of the guards bounced on his toes, his eyes glowing with adoration.

"I'm a big fan of your work, sir," the guard said as he let Roger through with the barest of glances at his SIN.

Roger's instincts cringed in horror. Surely the Denver Council had a way of implementing consistent security measures across the sectors. Didn't the Council representatives have any idea what could happen with such differences? He was in the middle of composing a memo about the issue when the street lamp overhead dimmed as part of its cool-down cycle.

Roger's map notified him of an upcoming course correction and he turned the corner. A text-message ARO popped up in his vision, with SilveryK's sig in the header. He minimized all other AROs.

Another overhead street lamp cycled down. He walked in darkness, not needing the illumination.

The message was short and simple. *Is this what you're looking for?* A reassignment document for a Firewatch team to Ares O'Hare—what was Captain Climbing-Bear doing in Chicago? He was a field man, not a rent-a-cop—and several resignation letters, exit interviews, and interoffice memos had been attached to the message. Skimming the names—Theo, Agatha, Stiletto, Frankie, Drake, and others—he recognized the termination agreements of all the Sioux-born KE employees who'd quit and followed Roger west.

Above those documents, SilveryK had inserted and highlighted an Ares Firewatch threat assessment document, dated two months ago (way before the date Roger had given her), that detailed possible retrieval options for a dangerous and high-risk asset. The asset wasn't named, yet the list of the asset's skills and requisite "use all necessary force" warnings told Roger that Ares considered him a danger.

SilveryK was good. Not only had she figured out what he really wanted, she'd hacked his high-security commlink to send him the information he needed.

He called up his bank account and added a bonus to the remainder of SilveryK's fee. Before he could save the pending transaction, a bright burst of light dazzled his eyes. A boot splashed

in a puddle. Something slammed into his shoulder and the ground rose up to meet him.



“Roger, Roger, Roger.”

The words crawled inside his mind, burrowing through the haze of his confusion. He knew that voice. It was as familiar as his own. A trusted voice. A voice of betrayal.

“What have you done to me?” the voice continued.

Guilt and foreboding struck a dissonant chord within him. His heart shriveled. His instincts screamed, urging him to find a place to hide. Bad things were coming. He could hear them scurrying in the shadows.

He became aware of himself in pieces. Cold concrete pressing against a sore cheek. Cable ties biting into his wrists, pinning his hands behind his back. Eyes struggling to open, glued shut by blood and other fluids. Bruised lips, swollen tongue, a tinge of salty copper in his mouth. Throat so dry it made Death Valley seem like a tropical jungle.

The tip of a steel-toed shoe prodded ribs that creaked in protest. “I know you’re awake, Roger. You can’t pretend. Not anymore.”

Awareness slammed through the haze, breaking him free of his dreamscape refuge. Two words made themselves known to him. The first tumbled through his brain, summing up his situation nicely.

Bobica.

The second rumbled past vocal chords he thought too sore to respond. “Damien.”

Damien Knight laughed and pulled his foot away from his side. “Welcome back to Ares, Roger. We missed you.”

His left eye finally worked its way open. Florescent brightness stabbed into his overly sensitive corneas. He caught a glimpse of concrete block walls, a drop ceiling, and Damien’s expensive armored slacks. He tried to turn his head, to see who—or what—else might be in the room with him, but the headache roared to life behind his eyes, preventing him from focusing on much. His eye closed against the pain.

“Go ... hell,” he gasped. As much as he wanted the anger, needed it to keep himself focused, it slipped through his grasp like water in a sieve. Goosebumps prickled along his limbs. He was in so much trouble. This was so wrong. “... didn’t leave. You ... fired me. Remember?”

Callused fingers touched his cheek with feather lightness. He could hear the shape of his breathing, feel the weight of his surprise. “Takuwe, Roger? Why did you run to Denver?”

Takuwe. The word swirled around him, a leaf in a gale, as he fought for understanding. It wasn’t Muscogee, the language of his people, the Creeks. Nor was it Tsalagi, the other Indian language he spoke fluently. *Takuwe.* Then it hit him.

Takuwe, Lakota for “why.”

Damien spoke Lakota?

Odd. He had thought he knew him. He had been his best friend for the better part of three decades. He understood his moods, could predict his thoughts, and watched his back like a hawk. But the Unlimitech tour proved just how little Damien shared with him. And now he find out he speaks Lakota.

“Answer me, dammit. What happened at Unlimitech?”

His throat clenched in protest as he forced the words out. “I won’t retread this path with you, Damien. You know damn well what happened.”

The pause lasted a microsecond too long. “Tell me anyway.” The words slithered, dragging themselves across the inside of his skull. “Let’s hear your side of the story.”

His left shoulder ached. Liquid warmth seeped down his arm. A spike of pain stabbed into his forehead, uncurling a memory.

The splash of a boot in water echoed down the alley. His face in the mud, against the damp gravel of the street. His eyes cracked open. An ork street samurai stepped out of the shadows, his Guardian pistol glinting in the street lights. “Got ‘em.”

A female dwarf emerged from another direction, bracelets and chains chiming against her cyberware. “This is Roger Soaring Owl? I thought he would be much more impressive.”

Shoes slosed up from behind him.

His own gun, a heavily modified Ares Predator, pressed against his side, trapped between him and the pavement. His hand inched down.

“Dev, he’s reaching for his gun!” The dwarf cried.

“Idiot,” a voice hissed, the male accent dressed in shades of the Denver Sioux Sector.

In the remembered sounds of rainfall, he found his focus and stilled. Damien’s voice rumbled on, probing, questioning. But it was a pathetic imitation of a voice captured through news feeds, weak and cajoling instead of strong and thundering. Trained by the best Ares magicians in how to resist spells, Roger released a long slow breath and pushed with his mind. The foreboding shattered, so too did the illusion.

“Shit!” one of his abductors yelled.

He opened his eyes. A block room basement? Check. His hands tied? Check, but with a cheap cord, not a cable tie. Head injuries? Just a headache. Shoulder? Definitely shot through, not bandaged.

The Lakota man masquerading as Damien was looking past him. The dwarf and the ork guarded the doorframe of an open stairwell. At either side of him staggered a male human mage and a female shaman respectively.

“What’s wrong?” The Damien impersonator asked.

“He’s f—” the shaman gasped and toppled over backward with a bullet hole in the middle of her forehead.

The abductors turned toward the stairs.

Roger leaped up from the floor, his foot striking out against the impersonator’s throat. Bone crunched and he flew backward.

The dwarf and the ork went for their guns but seemed uncertain which way to turn. The whooshed thud of a silenced weapon sounded again, solving their problem. The dwarf went down with three bullets to the chest.

The mage raised his hands, a hint of color playing along his fingertips. Roger kicked the mage’s feet out from under him while pulling his hands out of the cord.

The ork turned toward Roger. The mage cursed and started another spell; fire licked his hands. A middle-aged, dark-skinned man in a business suit lunged out of the stairwell and put a bullet through the mage’s eye.

The ork made his decision, firing at the newcomer, whose reflexes were good enough to dodge at the last minute. The ork took aim at the newcomer again, but the barrel of his gun shook. His

knees trembled. Roger could see the indecision flashing across the younger man's face.

Roger sympathized. For a moment, he entertained the notion of letting the ork surrender or flee, but years of ingrained military training had already taken over. His Predator was already out. Roger squeezed the trigger twice, and the bullets thudded into the ork's chest.

The ork glanced over his shoulder with a whimper of surprise, chased by a mouthful of blood as his fingers tightened on the trigger. The Guardian fired, jerking the ork's arm sideways. The bullet slammed into the wall with a puff of concrete dust. His eyes stared into Roger's, wide and questioning.

Takuwe, those eyes seemed to ask.

Then they glazed over, and the ork's body crumpled to the ground.

The dark-skinned man got to his feet, a slight smile playing across his lips. "Well met, Mr. Soaring Owl."

Roger trained his pistol on the other man. "You'll forgive me if I take a moment to ask who the hell you are."

"You can call me Kay. Everybody does. Zany Zuni sends his regards." An image flashed up in Roger's AR, a walking rabbit icon dressed as a Zuni warrior and holding a sign on a stick which said "My Regards" in Muscogee.

Roger's facial muscles twitched. Temptation made his trigger finger itch. He could pull it, leave this Kay laying as dead as the idiots who'd abducted him. But would it solve anything? "Zany Zuni doesn't exist."

Kay shrugged, his machine pistol dangling from his hand. "And yet, I understand you've already made his acquaintance."

Three heartbeats thundered in his ears before Roger lowered his weapon, at which point Kay holstered his.

"How much did he pay you in return for rescuing me?" Roger asked.

Smirking, Kay shook his finger at Roger. "That's not quite how the Exchange works. I was asked to do a favor. Yes, there will be remuneration at some point in the future, but it could take any form and it is doubtful money will be involved."

Holstering his Predator, Roger tried again. "So you're saying this rescue is my payment?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. What is it you did for the Exchange?"

When Roger didn't answer, Kay smirked. "Welcome to Denver, Mr. Soaring Owl. Enjoy your visit. Perhaps we'll see each other again, someday."

Kay walked out of the basement, leaving Roger with a pile of bodies and just as many unanswered questions.



When Roger surfaced, he found himself in the worst part of Denver. the Aurora Warrens. Barren, lawless, and dangerous, only the SINless, the ghouls, and society's disinherited lived there. It was every man, woman, and child for himself. Even the tourists knew to avoid the Warrens. People who wandered there and could not protect themselves usually never came back out.

In the pre-dawn haze, Roger activated his low-light contacts so he could see clearly.

Dilapidated buildings towered over him. A few rusting husks of old vehicles lay strewn across the streets, shattered glass, trash, and

unusable debris that was wind-blown into random heaps. The street lamps were busted, and many of them had exposed wiring poking out of gaping holes in their bases. Bullet holes, graffiti (made of actual, physical paint, not AR), and stains of various dried fluids decorated the sidewalks and homes. At first glance, the streets felt empty. Yet he could hear the skitter of claws against concrete, see movement in shadows that were so deep that low-light couldn't penetrate them.

He actually found himself hoping for ghouls. Ghouls could be killed. Insects, though ... God help him if there were bugs here, even normal-sized mundane insects. He had a thing about roaches.

Roger straightened, putting on his best badass body language like a coat. He drew his pistol, zipped his jacket, and pulled down a map of the area from the Matrix. As soon as he did, he knew he'd made a mistake. The details surrounding the flashing "You Are Here" cursor didn't even come close to matching what he could see. At least the map gave him an orientation, and Roger used that to start moving.

On impulse, he pulled up his agent and launched it with instructions to search the local runner boards for the location of the infamous ghoul hangout known as the Meat Market. As much as Roger would rather run into ghouls instead of insect spirits, he would be a fool to walk right into their open arms.

Shadows followed him as he moved. Metal scraped along pavement. Shoe leather scuffed upon gravel debris. Whispers echoed in darkened alleys.

"... take him," a voice of indistinguishable gender hissed.

Another voice shushed the first.

Roger raised his weapon and fired in the general direction of the voices. The gunshot thundered through the quiet. Squeals responded. A trash can hit the ground and footsteps fled in the opposite direction.

After that, he was left alone, though he caught occasional glimpses of people hiding behind barriers as he passed.

It took him the better part of an hour to navigate his way through the Warrens. He saw no border, no fence to keep the undesirables locked in. One moment, he walked through a war-torn landscape worthy of hell, the next he stepped through an empty lot next to a pre-fab apartment complex. The complex was fenced, with decent middle-tier security measures, and the map he had pulled off the Matrix made sense again.

Having learned his lesson about walking in Denver, Roger ordered an auto-taxi to meet him the next block over.

"Destination?" it asked when he climbed inside.

Roger gave it his apartment's address and let the taxi take the appropriate fare. Save for a spectacular sunrise that painted the clouds in shades of purple, orange, and red, the ride home was uneventful. He opened his search program, seeking information on the Exchange and Zany Zuni. Dozens of hits came back in less than two seconds. In half a minute, he had hundreds. By the time the taxi pulled in front of his apartment building, hundreds of thousands of links overwhelmed the commlink.

The first three links pointed to news stories about Tokyo Stock Exchange, while several others referenced a variety of shops using "Exchange" in their name. Then he saw the dictionary sites defining the word, and several public forum threads offering exchanges of baby clothes, toys, and old gaming sims.

Sighing, Roger ordered his agent to filter the result set, specifying what he wanted. The agent acknowledged the task and went to work.

Once he was home, Roger examined his shoulder. He had seen worse. The wound was a pretty clean through-and-through, though the bullet had nicked his clavicle. Pulling out his top-of-the-line medkit, he patched it up with a water resistant compression bandage, a quick-heal injection, and a dose of antibiotics. Then he showered and changed. Breakfast consisted of a bowl of dry cereal and a whiskey with a splash of real orange juice.

As seemed to always be the case, someone called just as he shoved a spoonful of soy oatie-o's into his mouth. The caller ID flashed up in shades of blue with the logo of the Atlantean Foundation. Closing the window, Roger sent the call to voicemail. The last thing he needed to deal with right now was a bunch of magic artifact hunting goons with no sense of personal boundaries.

Once he finished breakfast, he cleaned his gun, topped off his clip, then re-opened Sinopa's file. He chose a video clip at random.

The apartment around him faded, furniture dissolving into high-top tables and barstools. The walls brightened with fancy murals of amorphous people enjoying the nightlife. Lights flashed overhead, keeping time with a dance beat out of last week's charts. Several teenage girls squealed with delight as a young man invited one to dance. The camera scanned the room, painting faces with a target only the feed could see. With each one, a line cut through the image a moment later as facial recognition software rejected a match.

An older woman swatted her hand in the direction of the camera and the image plunged, showing a glimpse of floor at dizzying speed before it righted itself and continued on its way.

Camera drone, Roger surmised.

Face after face got rejected until, in a back corner, two Chinese faces lit up with green auras. The drone flew over to their table and coasted to a halt somewhere above them. The men's rapid-fire speech sounded of harsh syllables and unintelligible words. Along the side of the image, a translation program opened up. It went from Mandarin and Cantonese through several other languages before settling on Pu Xian. Subtitles popped up along the bottom as the men spoke.

"... good news indeed. The Golden Triangle is indeed interested. But how do we know this offer is genuine and not some trick of the Sioux?"

"I have the information from a reliable source. Also, Roger Soaring Owl is in Denver. I doubt he would be here if he did not intend to go through with the deal."

"When is the auction?"

"A week from Friday, midnight. A private chat room within the Matrix."

The men shook hands. The drone picked up a crackle of paper, but not the visual sight of it. Then the video cut off, the rest of it edited out.

Roger grabbed a granola bar and pulled up the next video.



Want to play a game? the message interrupted Oak just as he reached the ninety-first level of Night of the Living Shedim. He was just about to take on the boss, a ghoulish being possessed by one of the shedim mobsters, when the text scrolled across the bottom of the VR.

Oak would have killed it, but then he saw the icon of an upright rabbit dressed in warrior Indian garb. Another shuffling zombie-ghoul strode up to him, chainsaw in hand. Oak smiled and paused the game. *Yes*, he chatted back. *I'm tired of keeping track of my father.*

Think you can hack your way into a club?

Ha! That's easy, Zany. Why don't you come up with something more complicated?

I would, but then things would get too serious. I like to keep things fun.

Which club?

A little place in Detroit called Bumpers. It's a cop club. Knight Errant employees have taken the place over.

Oak pulled out of virtual reality. His father and his babysitter had both left the hotel. He stretched out, making himself comfortable on the couch, and dove back in. *Sounds fun. What do you want me to do?*

Retrieve a data package. Deliver it to the Nexus, but only to a girl named Perri.

What's in the package?

Zany Zuni tapped his long foot sternly. *Now, Oak. You know better. Don't you go snooping, either. That package is encrypted. I'll know if you peek.*

Oh, come on, Zany. Can't you just tell me a little?

One of Zany Zuni's ears flopped over. He bounced on his feet for a moment. *Let's just say I'm playing little joke on a dragon at an old general's expense and leave it at that.*

Oak frowned, then nodded. *Okay.*

Zany Zuni's ears perked back up. The rabbit gave Oak all the details and the boy went to work. Bumpers' security ended up being mostly flash, with very little bang. Anyone, it seemed, could get into the node if they put in any effort. The music pounded at skull-splitting levels, and the walls cycled through different sporting events—all live for those visiting in AR. The virtual drinks smoked.

Dressed in an adult icon wearing a rookie KE uniform, recommended by Zany in case Oak goofed and someone realized he hadn't been there before, Oak strutted around the bar trying to act casual. He got a few dirty glances when he bumped into other icons, but the other cops laughed when they saw his rank and let him pass.

After a few moments of searching, Oak found the package in a corner, sitting on a lone table that faded in and out as if cloaked. He logged in with an admin password, offered up the encryption key, and the table stopped fading. He grabbed the ring-sized box wrapped in Knight Errant-logo birthday paper. Glued to the top was an encrypted card with the Exchange's symbol watermarked into the encryption. Beneath it, Oak could see washed traces of someone else's account, but he wouldn't know who unless he hacked the package.

Oak sighed. He had promised not to peek. He took the package, routed himself back to Denver, and crept in the back door to the Nexus where he found the woman Zany described waiting for him.

"Just in time," she said with a smile. "I'm Perri. It's a pleasure to meet you, Oak Simon."

"Um, yeah. Hi." A warm fuzzy feeling swished around in Oak's stomach. He grinned like an idiot and handed her the package while stammering for something to say.

At that moment, dumpshock kicked in. Oak screamed in

shock. When he opened his eyes, his father stood over him, the AR goggles dangling from his hand.

"And that, I think, is enough of that. No more games, boy. It's time you went cold turkey and returned to your shamanic studies. Once you prove you can dance the magic, you can have limited access back."

Ray Simon smashed the goggles against the nightstand as Oak watched in helpless agony.



Most of the intelligence Sinopa had gathered was much like the first, with details about the auction's content. Every single bit mentioned Roger's name in one capacity or another. "Soaring Owl in Denver" was spoken with a great deal of weight, and with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Roger could see Sinopa's concern.

His calendar chimed a reminder for his morning meeting. Grunting in annoyance, Roger summoned another taxi and ordered it to the Eagle's Nest. The taxi shot off like a rocket, racing down the Denver streets. It weaved and bobbed, cutting between cars and trucks as if it were a motorcycle.

"Alert, alert," the vehicle's computerized system intoned. "Pursuant to Denver city statute thirty-four, paragraph one eighteen, it is illegal for passengers to interfere with the operation of an auto-taxi. There is a two-thousand-nuyen fine for each offense. Your face and SIN have been recorded by internal security, and you will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

"I'm not doing anything!" Roger yelled as the vehicle took a sharp left.

The system ignored his protest and repeated the warning. A shrill tonal assault filled the taxi's cabin, designed to disrupt the concentration of a hacker. Roger knew that system. He designed something similar for Knight Errant decades ago. He also knew the way to get around it. He pulled out a pair of sound-dampening earplugs.

The taxi screeched around another corner, throwing Roger against the opposite side of the passenger seat. One of the plugs slipped out of his hand, rolling under the seat.

"Dammit to hell!"

He tried fishing for the errant plug, but the taxi's constant swerving kept him lurching around like a drunken sailor. Just as he managed to position himself on the floor, one arm reaching under the seat, the taxi's brakes engaged. His head slammed into the dash, and he lost the other earplug in the dark depths.

His vision swam with stars and dark edges. His shoulder ached again, though the bandages held. Roger pushed himself upright as the doors popped open. He had a moment to see two teenage human boys, go-gangers going by the faux leather and stylized facial tattoos, aiming machine guns at him. From the other side of the taxi, a shock-glove-covered hand reached over his shoulder.

"We can do this the hard way, or the easy way," a female voice purred.

Roger raised his hands up in the air. "Easy is good. I like easy."

"Get out of the car. Slowly."

Roger inched out of the taxi, keeping track of his attackers, their weapons, and their locations.

They'd each surged at some point in their life. One had gills, another had feathered hair. The third, when he caught a glimpse of her, had deformed anime cat eyes. That could almost be cyberware. But their clothing was tattered, ripped along knees and seams. Dark circles ornamented their eyes, and their skin appeared pale and dusty. So, too poor to afford the good 'ware.

They held their weapons like they knew how to use them, though. They also had the intelligence to bring him to the parking lot of an abandoned warehouse somewhere in the UCAS sector. He tried grabbing a map from the Matrix and found his 'link jammed.

"I think you have the wrong person," he said.

"Shut up," Gillthroat said.

"You're Roger Soaring Owl, aren't you?" Featherhead asked.

"No."

Cateyes laughed. "Liar," she said. "Tau checked your SIN before she hacked control of your taxi."

"Fine. Let's say I am who you say I am. What do you want with me?"

Gillthroat bounced on his toes. "To take you out, bastard. You're famous. We punch your ticket and our rep is made."

Roger sighed. He thought this nonsense was over when he lost his job at Knight Errant. "Then why haven't you done it yet?"

"What do mean?" Featherhead asked.

Two boys, one girl. Try as he might, he didn't see a fourth anywhere. Which meant Tau worked remotely. In an empty parking lot, only the taxi could be used against him. But a jammer worked both ways. So long as the jammer had power, Tau couldn't reach the taxi even if she tried.

"If you wanted to kill me to cement your street cred," Roger replied, "you should have shot me while I was still in the taxi. That's how the professionals operate."

Gillthroat lowered his weapon in confusion. "But that wouldn't be fair."

"Neither is what I'm about to do to you."

The teens blinked in surprise. Roger shrugged, an apologetic expression on his face, and moved.



"Did I, or did I not, tell you to be on time?" Sinopa fumed.

It appeared that the theme of Sinopa's office décor was "grey." A basic desk and several chairs matched the unadorned walls in hue and tone. Two short, old-fashioned file cabinets sat in a corner, with a coffee service sitting atop one.

Roger entered and tossed his jacket over the back of a chair. "My apologies. I had business to take care of."

"In the UCAS Sector," Ray Simon commented. "Yes, we know." Anger glimmered in the depths of his eyes despite his calm poise. "I hope you got paid for your work."

Fury rose within Roger's breast, an untamed beast demanding to be released. "I just killed three kids who thought it would be fun to take me on a joy ride and put a bullet in my brain pan. Not that you would care, Simon. You always did put yourself before others."

"How dare you!" Ray clenched his fists and returned glare for glare.

"Children!" Sinopa shouted. "That is enough."

Roger pulled himself back from the brink. "Where's the general?"

"He has a busy schedule. He couldn't wait around to see your reaction to the news."

Confusion washed through Roger's mind, followed by a chaser of curiosity. "Doesn't he know you called me last night?"

"Haven't you heard? He hasn't heard!" Ray chuckled, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers together. "You have a reprieve."

Roger blinked and looked his question at a scowling Sinopa.

"I don't know how the hell you did it," she answered. "The request came through official channels."

"What request?"

"A summons to Ghostwalker's Liaison office. The dragon would like to speak to you."

Roger's knees went watery. He slumped down in a free chair. "What?"

Ray got to his feet and patted Roger's shoulder. He leaned down close, muttering into Roger's ear. "You do know what Ghostwalker does to spies, yes?"

Roger gathered himself. "I am no spy."

Ray shrugged. "Tell that to the dragon when he's picking you out of his teeth."

With that final word, Ray Simon excused himself.

Sinopa reached for a carafe, pouring two cups of soycaf and handing one to Roger. When she settled herself back into her chair, she reopened the conversation. "Tell me about Ray."

"You're the director of OMI. I doubt I have anything that you don't have."

Breathing into her cup, Sinopa said, "Humor me. Tell me why you and he don't get along."

Roger warmed his hands against the steaming cup. The scent of roasted beans calmed his fear. He let a small sip of brew linger on his tongue so he had time to think.

"I used to be a military pilot, back when the UCAS was still the United States of America. Ray was my wingman. We ran sorties against the U.S. Air Force. One day, the USAF knew everything we were doing. It was like they could read our minds. Ray panicked, abandoned the mission and left a huge gap in our formation. A lot of good people died that day."

Sinopa nodded, sipping at her own drink. "You got a huge promotion out of that."

"Ray wanted those stripes. Hell, he wanted stars. Guess he changed his mind at some point."

There was nothing he could add, so the two drank in silence. When Roger put his empty cup on her desk, Sinopa touched his hand. Some unidentifiable emotion lurked in the depths of her gorgeous brown eyes.

"Just so you know, I don't believe you're a spy."

Roger squeezed her hand. "I guess I'd better see what Ghostwalker wants."



Roger headed for the Hub, though he didn't go to the Liaison Office immediately. Instead, he made a stop at a few side shops, picked himself up a new set of clothes and a tub of nanopaste, sneaked into a public restroom, and changed his look.

Along the way, he had to download another map from the Matrix to keep himself from getting lost. On the third try (the first

two maps were old) he found a map drawn up for the Olympics. Cursing, he bought himself a soycaf from a street vendor.

"I really need to get out of the Eagle's Nest more," he muttered to himself. "I don't know this city at all."

Guided by the tourist map, he took a walking tour of the restaurants and clubs on Sinopa's intel list. There had to be someone who knew about this auction. He dropped a few hints, and a few nuyen, in the palms of doormen, bartenders, and waitresses. He even stopped by Wonderland to see the infamous Alyss, but he was rebuffed at the door.

"Your kind ain't welcome," the burly troll bouncer said.

"I'm a paying customer just like everyone else," Roger protested.

The troll sniffed derisively. "You smell military, or maybe cop. Or spy." He leaned down, his tusks inches from Roger's jaw. "You ain't a spy, are you?"

"No," Roger protested, perhaps a little too loud. Several eyes swung in his direction. Giving up the attempt as a lost cause, Roger backed away and reconsidered his strategy. Intelligence gathering was not as easy as it seemed.

He made his way along a different thoroughfare when another message from SilveryK showed up in Roger's inbox. This time it contained the morning's Sioux immigration report with a list of Ares employees who'd come to Denver. Wageslaves and middle managers, a few sales people, Tyler Climbing-Bear, and a plethora of recruiters. It took Roger a few moments to recognize the significance of Climbing-Bear's name. So when the call came in a moment later, from Tyler himself, Roger found himself torn between genuine gratitude at seeing his old student and sudden distress that Tyler might kill him.

He called up an image of his real features to cover his disguised face from his caller and answered the 'link.

"Heya, boss," Tyler said, a crooked grin on his face. "You have some time to chat?"

"Not at the moment. I'm on my way to a meeting."

Tyler's face fell. "Well, call me when you're done. I'm at the Hub right now and could really use a friend."

Roger hesitated. Anne Ravenheart had been his favorite protégé, but Tyler came in a close second. The younger man had been a natural at everything from tactics to street smarts to weaponry skills. Tyler, in fact, was a physical adept of phenomenal skill and the closest thing Roger had to a son.

It hurt to think Damien sent Tyler, of all people, to bring Roger back.

The pain vanished at Tyler's next words.

"I've been to Chicago, Roger. I've seen ..." the words trailed off. Tyler swallowed and bit off another word. "It."

It. "It" needed no explanation. Roger had been to Chicago too. He knew what exactly what Tyler referred to.

Memory hit him, sudden and hard, sledgehammer blows of images he had buried deep so the Truth Dancers couldn't pull them out.

He should never have opened the token. He knew better than to trust anything on his private commlink. It didn't have the protections his work 'link had built in. But the header came from the Exchange, the mythological favor mill that everyone wanted to know about. Malware and virus scans came back empty, so he gave into curiosity.

The Unlimitech logo unwound from the message's core, with disturbing stills of lab workers, true-form bugs, and a mosquito spirit investing a KE security officer. None of which Roger would have

given credit to had he not recognized the officer in the last photo. He couldn't remember her name, but she was a good woman, a dedicated worker, and she had disappeared on an escort trip for some high-level Unlimitech manager. Days after, a reassignment form came through with her name on it.

Along the edges of the token scrolled the words, "Roach motel. You can get in, but you can't get out."

He deleted the token. Scrubbed his 'link, and gotten a new one, this one loaded with the latest security software from Knight Errant, cutting-edge stuff not even available to KE's customers.

It didn't work. The next day, he had a voicemail without even having received a call. Zany Zuni, the caller ID said. The rabbit's voice haunted him. "I need a favor, Roger. One little favor. Just go see."

"Boss? Roger!" Tyler's voice broke the spell. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Roger wiped his clammy palms against his pants, rubbing off a bit of the paste. "Yes, let's meet. Where are you?"

"The Luna Hotel, in the CAS sector, just outside the Hub."

"Great. Give me twenty minutes." He closed the call and stood in the center of the bustling Hub for a long moment, trying to catch his breath. His heart pounded, constricting in his chest. A feather-light touch brushed against his pants.

Roger's hand shot out, wrapping around the wrist of a slender woman in a business suit.

"Hello, handsome," she said. Her face lit up, her lush lips parted, her eyes sparkled. She gazed at him with a combination of awe, lust, and charm, eyelashes batting.

For a moment, the strength of her personality drew him in, captured his total attention. Then he noticed her wrist twisting in his grip, her hand closed tight around a smallish object that she didn't want to drop just to get away from him.

"Social adept, huh?" he asked with a cocky grin. His fingers squeezed a nerve in her wrist and she gave a little squeal. Her fingers spasmed and a mini-drone dropped to the ground. "Ah-ah. Didn't anyone tell you spying in Denver is illegal?"

"Hey, a girl can try." She gave him her best pouty hangdog expression. This time, he could feel the pressure begging him to give in.

Roger stepped on the drone, crushing it under his heel. "Try with someone else."

He released her then and, with a scowling backward glance, she stalked off.

He went to find another restroom, muttering to himself as he searched. "I think I'm really beginning to hate Denver."



The Luna Hotel was a small place, sandwiched between a classy restaurant and business office. Thin and tall, it had a façade as wide as a small delivery truck. But what it lacked in width, it made up for in both depth and height, rising fifteen stories into the air and holding almost eighty rooms that were as large as many studio apartments.

The elevator, almost as cramped as the registration desk, wore an out-of-order sign. Groaning, Roger made his way up the steep stairs to the eighth floor. Up and up he went. His toes caught on the next stair's lip sometime between flights four and five, sending him sprawling on the concrete. He caught himself with his hands, so his head didn't hit the stairs. The top of his kneecap caught the edge of

another stair, though. Needles of pain shot through both it and his still-healing shoulder.

"This just isn't my day," he said.

Pushing himself upright, he managed to make it up the remaining flights. He stepped into the corridor. Must and dust assaulted his nostrils, along with a brief whiff of decay. Then the scents were gone, replaced by a faux flower scent wafting from the air freshener in the corner. Roger stepped up to 806. The sound of running water came through the door, from a shower or a sink.

He hesitated, memories prickling along his mind.

Stella. That was her name. Such a bright young woman with a promising future. Roger had met her three times, and each time she had impressed him with her clever wit and unorthodox solutions to major problems.

So, he went to Chicago. Not at the behest of this stranger whom he had never met. Certainly not to do a favor for the Exchange. He had gone because Stella had been one of his and he had to know if she really was working security at Unlimitech.

He didn't call, he didn't warn them. He just showed up, out of the blue, and asked for the grand tour. Demanded it, truth be told, like he had the right to know. No one questioned him. Roger Soaring Owl was famous. He had clout with Mr. Knight.

So they showed him. And they told him.

The e-token didn't even come close to the reality.

Roger shuddered. His fist centimeters from the door's surface.

He called Damien, met him in his virtual office. Demanded answers. And that stupid bastard, his best friend in the entire world, laughed it off.

"The best armor in creation, Roger. Weapons that could cut through anything. We could conquer the world with that biotech." Damien said.

"Financially speaking, that is," Damien added as an after thought.

Furious and betrayed, Roger tried to reign in his temper. But the seeds of argument had been sown. It wasn't just Roger who Damien betrayed. It was Anne, precious Anne, and her Firewatch team. Every Knight Errant employee who'd fought in Chicago, everyone who'd died or gotten trapped. Every civilian trapped behind the wall too, and those who managed to escape.

Halfway into the discussion, Damien told Roger to put up and shut up.

Shocked, Roger found he couldn't speak. And the moment was lost.

Damien dismissed him. Actually dismissed him, as Roger was some menial servant or a mere employee instead of the guy who'd had Damien's back for so many years.

Tyler had been to Chicago. His entire team had gone. The question was, had they come back?

Roger bit his lip. The taste of blood flooded his tongue. Someone had to stop Damien. Contrary to what Knight believed, Roger knew insect spirits could not be tamed or controlled. But Roger no longer had influence with Damien Knight, or the resources required to take down the CEO of a megacorporation. The Council of Chiefs might kick Ares out of its borders if Roger told them the truth, but he had no illusions about their willingness to go to war with Damien.

Unlimitech could be the beginning of a brand new super hive. Even if anyone took Roger seriously, Ares had a long reach. This situation required the assistance of people willing to piss off a megacorp, unafraid of the consequences, and with the power

to protect themselves. The Nexus might help him protect the information, but he had it on good authority that the hackers raised kids in that facility, and he wouldn't put any child at risk.

His link chimed a reminder at him, and a window appeared with a note from Sinopa telling him to quit playing around and see what the dragon wanted already.

The dragon.

Grimacing, Roger stepped down the corridor, up to the window overlooking the street. The hotel's wide green entrance canopy blocked his view of the sidewalk, but he didn't care. He opened a line, hesitated as he went over everything once more, then placed a call to Ghostwalker's Liaison.

When the receptionist answered, he introduced himself. "I need to speak to Ghostwalker."

The receptionist tilted her head to the side. "Ghostwalker is unavailable at the moment. Would you like to make an appointment?"

"He asked me to contact him."

"No, Mr. Soaring Owl," she chided. "He requested your presence, but you still need to make an appointment. Ghostwalker is a busy dragon. He doesn't fit his schedule around yours. You fit yours around his. Now, would you like to make an appointment?"

"Is his voice in?"

"Mr. Whitebird? I am afraid he is likewise indisposed at the moment. Would you like to make an appointment?"

Frustrated, Roger paced the window. Movement caught the corner of his eye, a door opening, but he dismissed it. "Can I leave a message?"

The receptionist nodded. "Certainly. I will forward you to Mr. Whitebird's voicemail."

Must, dust, and decay filled the air. Roger's nose crinkled in disgust. He had smelled that smell before, if he could just remember where.

The connection indicated a successful transfer to voicemail. "Mr. Whitebird, this is Roger Soaring Owl. I believe Ghostwalker would like to speak to me. I ... I need to speak to him also. Please call me back. There is something he needs to know. Something that affects all of us."

A hand tapped Roger's shoulder. He nodded, waving it off. After deciding he couldn't add anything else without risking exposure, he disconnected and turned around.

Captain Tyler Climbing-Bear was a short, burly man who'd packed on the pounds since Roger had last seen him. He had black hair cropped marine short with brown eyes and tanned skin. He wore jeans, a t-shirt, and his Knight Errant issue armored jacket. Roger could not see any antennae, claws, multi-faceted eyes, or other insect protuberances. There were no signs Tyler was a flesh-form insect spirit. In short, Tyler looked like the normal human he was supposed to be.

"Hullo, boss."

"Captain." Roger slapped Tyler on the arm, then shook his own hand in pain. Tyler's Knight Errant jacket felt like it had been stuffed with armor plate. "You modify your jacket?"

Tyler chuckled. "Gel packs. They solidify on impact, remember?"

Roger nodded, his tone as casual as he could make it. "Must be something new. The gel packs I've used require more force before they harden."

Tyler blinked. Disconcertment played across his face before he got his features under control. "Let's get back to my room. I don't want to talk in the hall."

"I don't blame you."

Like hotel rooms everywhere, the room contained both bed and bathroom. The usual bland art decorated the walls. The closet had no door and the room had no window, but the linens appeared clean and the floor vacuumed. Yet, Roger could not get that scent out of his nostrils. It clung to him.

"Sorry I don't have chairs," Tyler apologized.

Roger chuckled and took a corner of the bed. "That's all right. I've sat on worse."

Snorting, Tyler sat next to him. "I'm sure you have. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Anything for an old friend."

The conversation lulled. Tyler shifted around. He fiddled with the jacket's zipper. Roger let the silence stretch. He knew the emotions going through Tyler's heart.

Tyler jumped up, pacing the room. "They took my team."

"How?"

"Knight reassigned us to the Unlimitech facility for weapons testing. That's what he told us, what he promised me."

Roger buried his smirk. "You always did like the new toys."

Tyler growled. "How much did you see, boss?"

Roger's face smoothed over. The hint of earlier humor vanished. "Enough. Too much."

"We went into a laboratory where the technicians had syringes, nanobot sprays, and lots of other stuff spread out on a table. They told my team to disrobe. My people each got a shot. Little white pills, looked like rice grain, were inserted under the skin. Then everyone got sprayed down with a white, sticky goop a lot like spider webbing."

Roger stiffened. "Cocoons?"

"Nah." Tyler dismissed the concern with a wave. "We—they could still walk and move about. The stuff just covered the skin. Not as thick as an insect spirit cocoon, either. This stuff was harmless."

"You sound so sure about that." Even to him, Roger's voice sounded empty and despairing. Wincing, he leveled his tone. "What happened?"

"The first two days went fine. The techies fed the team a dose of royal jelly each morning, said it would help speed things along. The third morning, Donner disappeared. She was with us when we went to bed, and gone when we woke up."

"She died?" It was an easy assumption to make. Most people died when insect spirits got involved.

"Yes. No. I don't know. I didn't ask. It wasn't my job to know these things."

Roger leveled a glare at his former protégé, and Tyler had the grace to wilt. "You're the leader, Tyler. Knowing what is happening, or what is about to happen, to your people is part of your job. Protecting them is your job."

"Yeah, boss. I get it. It's just ... that's when the shit hit the fan. The pain. You can't imagine. It's like a million insects biting you under the surface of your skin. Your nerves are on fire. Every attempt at coherent thought flies out the window. Once in a while, there's a moment of clarity, where you remember where you are and what you're doing. Then it starts all over again."

"Tell me, Tyler. Did it ever occur to you to say no?"

"Are you kidding me, boss? Look at this." Tyler pulled off his jacket, then his tee. Brown chitinous plates covered his arms and chest, disappearing underneath the waist of his jeans.

Horror flooded Roger's stomach. The musty, dusty decay smell grew stronger as Tyler shed his clothing. Roger had been wrong. The man who'd been Tyler Climbing-Bear really was dead, replaced by a flesh-form insect spirit. Roger felt his heart break again. How much more of this could he take? "Please, God. No."

"Don't get me wrong, boss." The creature-who-had-once-been-Tyler flexed its arms. Sharp knife-like barbs extruded from his palms. "It hurt a lot. But it was worth it. I'm a brand new man. Nothing can hurt me anymore. Not even you."

Roger pushed off the bed and drew his weapon. He inched toward the door.

The flesh form grinned, flashing white teeth just like the real Tyler. It happened on rare occasions that the flesh forms kept the memories and personalities of the human host. "Mr. Knight is extremely unhappy with you, boss. He wants you killed or brought in."

"Not going to happen."

"Of course not, but what if I gave you a better offer?"

Index finger lying lightly across the trigger, Roger hesitated. "Excuse me?"

"My queen wants your help, Roger. If you help her break free of that odious laboratory, she'll give you anything you want. Money, fame, possessions. You name it."

Roger's foot hit the bottom of the doorframe. "And if I refuse?"

The flesh form shrugged unhappily. "Then I'll just have to kill you. We can't have word getting out that Knight doesn't have the control he thinks he has."

Roger reached for the door handle with his free hand. As the flesh form lunged, Roger fired twice. One bullet missed. The other ricocheted off the flesh form's armor.

"Told you, boss. I'm invulnerable."

The flesh form slashed at Roger, barbs extended. Roger yanked open the door, slamming it against the insect spirit. A barb got caught in the cheap wood, and the flesh form howled.

Roger ran.

His gun useless, he holstered it and looked for another weapon. But the empty corridor gave him nothing. So he bounded down the stairs, taking two and three at a time. The hissing monstrosity gave chase, yelling foul epithets. Then something huge fell down the center. Roger rounded the fifth bend in the stairwell as the flesh form hauled itself up on the stairs in front of him.

"Hullo again, Roger."

Roger lashed out with a roundhouse kick. The flesh form fell staggered back a few steps but did not fall.

The insect spirit shook a finger at him. "When you are you going to learn that you can't win this fight? I have a present for you." It pulled a throbbing white capsule the size of hairbrush from underneath its plates.

Yelping, Roger turned on his heels and ran back up to the sixth floor. At the closest end, he found a hatch marked "Fire Escape." He threw it open, exposing a bricked-up wall.

"Godammit."

He turned and fled to the end with the street-side window. The stair door opened just as he passed.

"You won't escape me, boss. Just accept it."



"Accept this, freak!" With the attitude that it was better to die on the street than become host to an insect spirit, Roger drew his gun and fired into the glass. The window broke in two places, then shattered as he threw himself against it. Momentum carried him forward. Screams filled his ears. Green filled his vision.

At the last moment, Roger remembered the canopy. The strong nanite-woven fabric broke his fall. Instead of tearing through it, he rolled over the edge. He lost enough velocity that he only broke his left arm when he landed, shoulder first, onto the sidewalk. He screamed when the bone snapped. But better his arm than his neck. He staggered to his feet.

The crowds backed away from him, except for one enterprising young man who made a grab for Roger's dropped gun. Roger put him down with a neck chop and retrieved his weapon. He looked up at the canopy, debating his next course of action.

A mage wearing Zone Defense Force colors pushed through the crowd. "Weapons license and SIN, please, sir."

The canopy bulged down as something, or someone, landed on it from above.

"Move," Roger shouted. He pushed the mage aside as the fabric ripped. The Tyler flesh form fell through and got back on its feet in one motion.

One curious boy escaped the clutches of his frightened parents, running forward to investigate.

"No!" Roger ran for the boy.

He was too late. The flesh form sliced the boy's head off, sending blood flying everywhere. The mother wailed. Screams of surprise turned into screams of horror. The crowd panicked. People ran into the busy city streets. Car brakes squealed. Fender hit fender. Metal shrieked in protest and horns honked in annoyance as the pedestrians ignored all traffic signs in their primal need for escape.

The mage stood in shock, mouth working.

"Move, man." Roger grabbed his arm and dragged him along.

The two men ran, the flesh form chasing behind them.

"What is that thing?" the mage asked.

"Insect spirit, flesh form. We need to get it away from the bystanders before we fight it."

The mage shook his head. "Fight it? Wait, what do we bait it with?"

Roger pressed his lips together and growled. "With me." A glance over his shoulder showed the insect spirit following after them. And it was catching up.

The mage glanced back and yelped.

"Run faster," Roger urged.

Sirens sounded, a clarion alarm carrying over the panic. Civilian vehicles pulled out of the road, whether their drivers wanted them too or not. Two Ares Roadmasters roared around the corner. Red and white lights coruscated from the rooftops.

"Reinforcements," the mage sobbed in relief.

Roger could have laughed at the irony of Ares vehicles driven to rescue him from an Ares threat. But the thought vanished as a hand grabbed his broken arm and dragged him back.

"Halt or we will open fire," the lead driver announced over his public address system.

The insect spirit chuckled as it pulled Roger close. "Go ahead."

In his mind, Roger imagined the click of dozens of weapons. He could hear the commands, just like he would have given back in the day. "*Safeties off. Take aim.*"

"What did you say?" the flesh form asked.

Roger blinked, then grinned as he realized he'd spoken aloud. "Fire."

A single gunshot echoed. The Predator recoiled a bit in his hand. The Tyler flesh form yowled.

"My foot!"

Slipping out of the spirit's loosened grip, Roger threw himself at the sidewalk. The PA speaker boomed out "All hands, open fire."

The air filled with thunder. Roger covered his head, with his right arm. The noise seemed to go on and on. Then a flash of heat roared nearby, streaking past Roger. It sounded like a fireball.

A high-pitched keening filled the air. It seemed to penetrate down to the bone. Even after the heat died, Roger could hear it. He lay still, not daring to move. The continuous hail of gunfire would cut him down if he got up at the wrong moment.

Finally, a hand touched his arm. Roger looked up in alarm, but only saw the mage. The mage's lips moved, but no sound came out. It took Roger a moment to realize the gunfire had stopped. He let the mage help him to his feet and looked around. He stood next to a blackened section of sidewalk where bits of ash and chitin lay in clumps.

A scrap of melted plastic rolled around. Roger stopped it with his foot. The distorted picture of Captain Tyler Climbing-Bear stared back at him. It was the last remnant of his protégé.

Raindrops fell upon Roger's cheeks. A fitting tribute, he thought, until he looked up at the sunny sky. That's when he realized he was crying.

"Tyler. God, why?"

The mage waved a hand in front of Roger's face, then gestured at Roger's left arm. When Roger realized the mage wanted to heal him, he nodded.

But the tears continued to fall.



Oak sulked in a corner of the hotel room. No matter what Ray said to him, the boy refused to speak to him. Ray finally surrendered to the inevitable and returned to work.

"He'll talk when he's ready, sir," Clouds-in-Eyes assured him.

"I won't have any son of mine addicted to the Matrix. He will grow up to be a powerful shaman, like his sister and brother."

"Of course, sir."

"Tell me you have my files."

The troll secretary handed over a data chip. "Everything you need to prove Roger Soaring Owl is a traitor to the Sioux and the Native American Nations, sir."

"Wonderful." Ray clapped his hands in glee. "Where did you get it?"

"With respect, sir, you shouldn't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to."

"I need to give you a raise, Clouds-in-Eyes."

The troll bowed. "As you wish, sir."

Ray plugged in the chip, examining the details of Roger Soaring Owl's downfall. The hacker had covered everything from Matrix posts to SIN trails and money transfers. Only the final touch remained. Making sure Soaring Owl showed up at his own auction.

Ray didn't even register the knock on the hotel room door.

Clouds-in-Eyes said something. Then repeated it closer to Ray's ears. "Shall I get that, sir?"

"Hmm? Yes, yes."

With a sudden whoosh of heat and air, the hotel room door evaporated into a thousand shards of burnt carbon. Oak shrieked. Ray half-turned, his focus still on his new toy. The three Truth Dancers he'd hired stood in the doorway. They walked in as if blowing down a door was a normal part of their routine.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ray stood up. "I'll have to pay for that damned door now. If you had news about Soaring Owl, all you had to do was call."

"Ray Simon," the shamans intoned, "you are summoned to our Dance Circle. We call on you to speak truth, and only truth, before the Sovereign Tribal Council."

"You can't summon me. I'm a Council member."

"Not anymore," Oak said. "Zany said you were getting fired because you won't play the game."

The shamans looked at Oak, then at Ray's confused expression, then back at Oak.

"Zany?" one of them asked.

"What game?" another added.

Oak bounced to his feet. "My best friend, Zany Zuni. The exchange game. You know how that works. If Zany gives you a gift, you've got to give one back. But Dad won't play right. He keeps taking, but doesn't give anything back."

"Interesting." The third shaman raised her (his?) hand and snapped a binding spell around Ray's arms. "I can see we'll have a lot to chat about. I do hope you haven't been leaving classified documents lying around the house. I would hate for your son to be a security risk."

Ray paled. His knees gave out and he sank to the floor.



It took Roger three days to recover from his misadventure, and he spent them all holed up in his apartment or in the Eagle's Nest, trying to explain to Sinopa that he was not starting an international incident. He gave her the basics; Damien had sent a crew after him, things got out of hand. And yes, there was a fireball. But since Roger was neither shaman nor mage, she couldn't pin that on him.

Once he finished healing, though, nothing could keep him indoors. If he planned to spend time in Denver, he needed to know the lay of the land. So he rented a car and spent a day driving around. Then he went to the Hub and spent another two days walking the district from one end to the other.

That's when he spotted Altitude, a cozy little bar off the beaten path that just seemed to call his name. So he took time out of his self-imposed mission for a drink. Besides, he thought better with a whiskey in his hand.

"Buy you another drink?"

Roger glanced at the polished surface of the bar, taking advantage of the mirrored surface to examine the man who'd spoken. It was an ork, well-dressed and well-spoken, with a face only an idiot—or a complete newcomer to Denver—wouldn't recognize.

"Nicholas Whitebird." Roger acknowledged. "What are you doing here?"

The ork chuckled, sliding onto the suddenly empty barstool beside Roger. "Altitude is my favorite place to relax. Everyone in Denver knows that."

It was almost an insinuation that Roger was losing his touch. Except he wasn't.

He was just losing his nerve. The events of the week had worn him down. Too many people wanted him for too many reasons, and all of them wanted him to betray his former best friend. Except for Damien, who just wanted his head. Could he trust Whitebird? Probably. But Whitebird's employer was a different matter all together.

Roger flicked his fingers in the air, signaling the elven bartender. She threw him a nod as she finished shaking up a Japanese Spirit Bomb. She pushed the nearly toxic drink over to the troll on the end, the waltzed over to claim Roger's empty glass.

"Another whiskey?"

He nodded. "Neat, this time."

"Put it on my tab," Whitebird interjected.

The bartender nodded, a smile on her dark lips. "Sure thing, Mister Whitebird."

"You don't have to do this," Roger said.

Whitebird shrugged. "I know the face of a man wrestling with demons. If I can help, even a little bit, I'll sleep better tonight."

An opening, discreet and polite. It would be so easy to lay all the cards on the table. But what, really, did he have to offer the dragon in return for the assistance he needed? And could he betray Damien so easily?

"Lively city you have here," Roger replied. "I haven't seen some of this tech yet."

"The latest in anti-surveillance. You'll find a lot of places in Denver are well equipped to deal with most problems."

"And what problems would those be?"

Whitebird shrugged. "The usual. Smuggling, drug running, espionage."

"Rumor has it the big G doesn't put up with that crap."

"He doesn't. Officially."

"Where is your boss, anyway?"

Whitebird smirked. "Tales we'll tell tomorrow, assuming we survive. Where is your boss? Ex-boss, I mean."

Roger fell silent. The bartender took the lull as an excuse to slide Roger his whiskey and a reddish-clear drink in a dainty slim-stemmed glass to Whitebird; a drink that looked suspiciously like a Shirley Temple.

The former KE VP looked at the drink, then at Whitebird's face, and then at the drink again as Whitebird sipped it.

"What?" the ork asked, his expression a portrait of innocence. "I'm working."

For the first time in two weeks, Roger Soaring Owl laughed.

