

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE

RIFTER®

Your Guide to the Megaverse

July 2000 Issue

G.M. Tips

Nightbane® Story

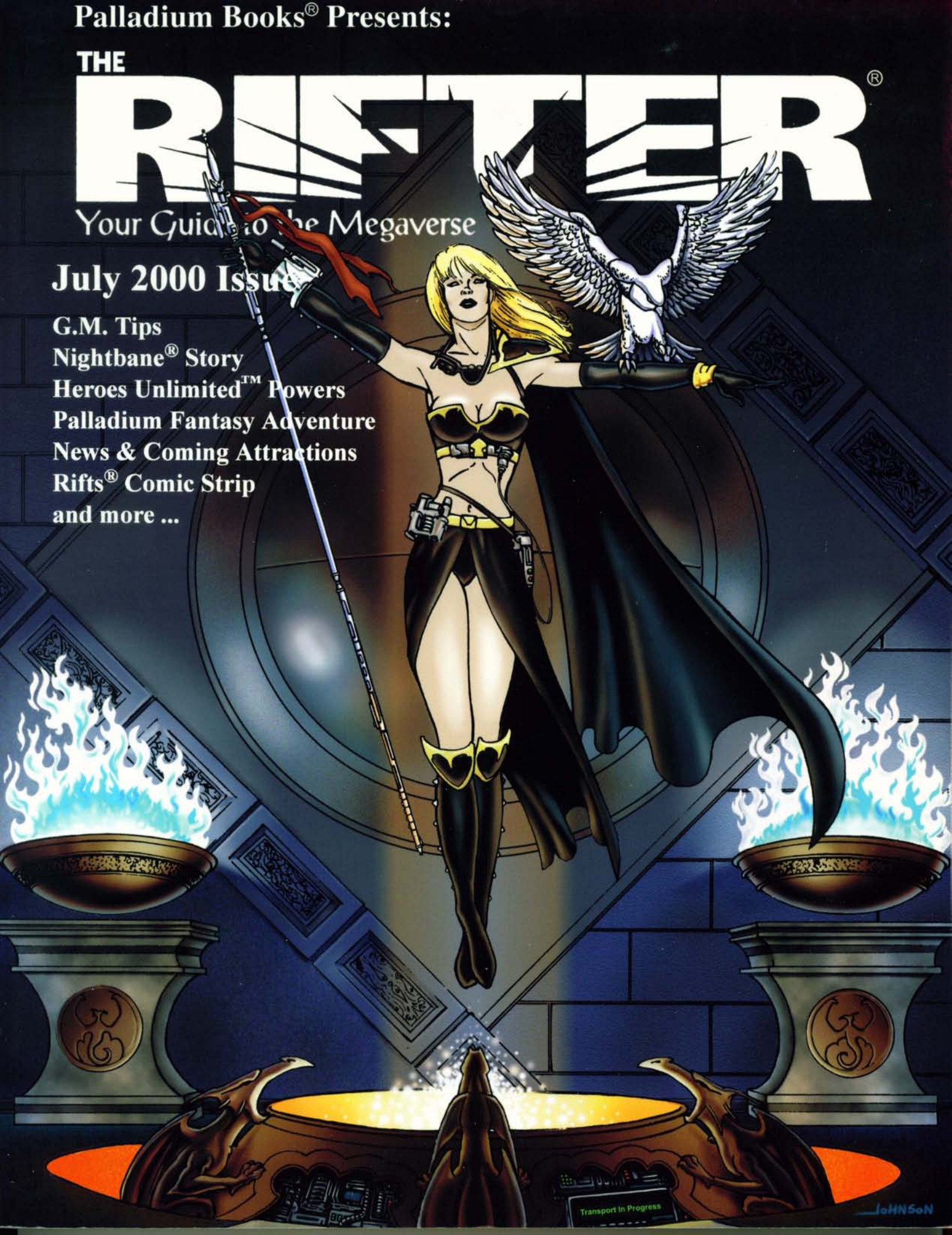
Heroes Unlimited™ Powers

Palladium Fantasy Adventure

News & Coming Attractions

Rifts® Comic Strip

and more ...



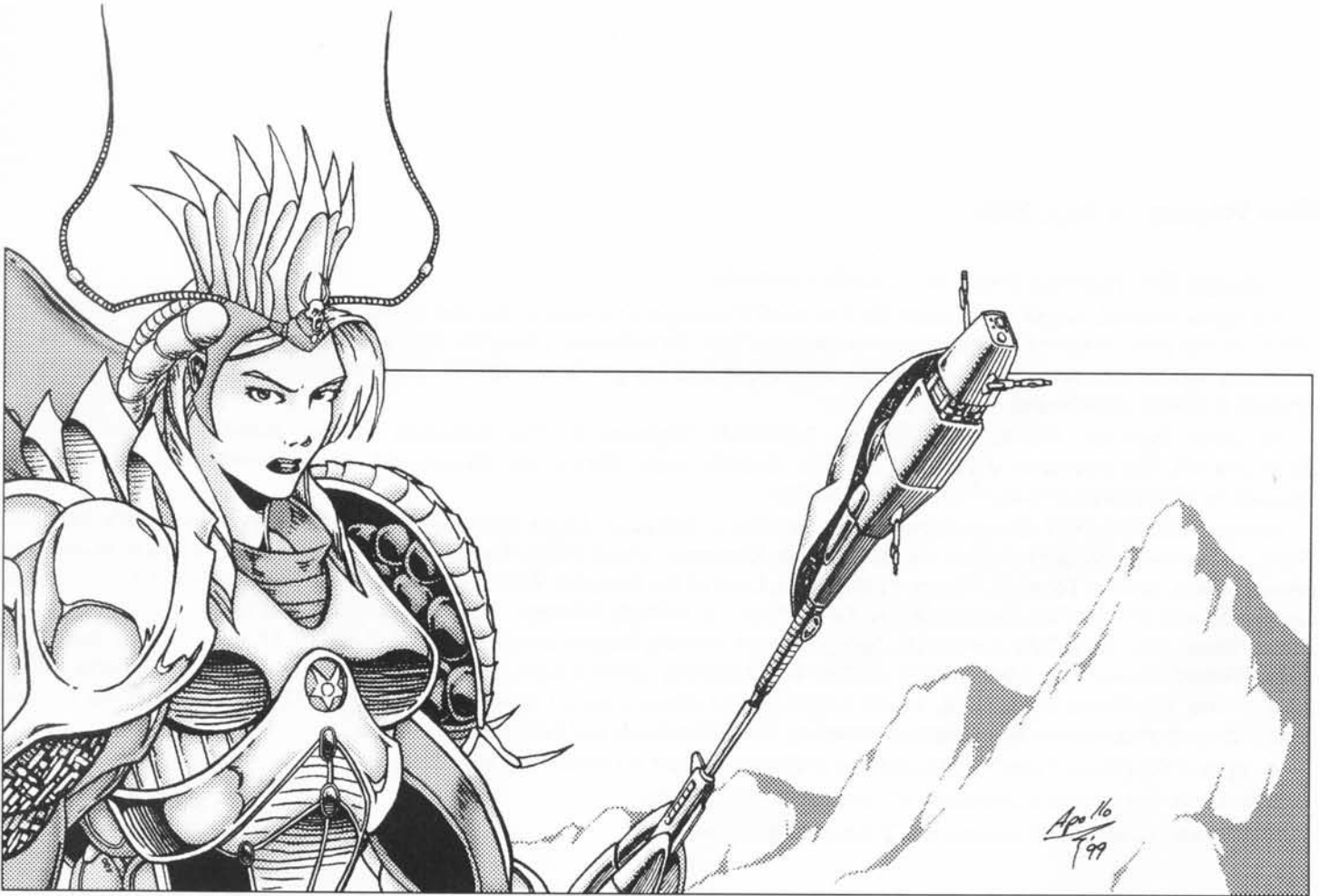
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Violence and the Supernatural

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

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

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



The Rifter® Number 11

Your guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!

First Printing — July, 2000

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Palladium Books® Presents:

THE RIFTER

BRANDT - 97

#11

Sourcebook and guide to the Palladium Megaverse®

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

Special Thanks to all of our contributors. Our apologies to anybody who got accidentally left out or their name misspelled.

Contents — The Rifter #11 — July, 2000 —

Page 6 — Art

One of Kevin Siembieda's and Bill Coffin's favorite illustrations by *Freddie Williams II*. It depicts a Cyber-Knight™ from the *Rifts® RPG* with books and ink to symbolize the creation process and imagination that goes into and comes out of Palladium's role-playing games. This piece was one of Freddie's "samples" and it helped to get him a job at Palladium as a freelance illustrator. More of Freddie's work can be seen on page 12 and numerous sourcebooks, the most recent including *Siege on Tolkeen One™*, *The Library of Bletherad™* and *Century Station™*. You can expect to see a lot more of Freddie's work in books to come.

Page 7 — From the Desk

of Kevin Siembieda

Adventure and surprises (at least for publisher Kevin Siembieda) concerning coming projects, conventions and licenses involving Palladium Books.

Page 8 — Palladium News

A bouncing baby girl (Why do people say that? Babies, little newborns don't bounce at all. Babies don't get "bouncing" until about four months in) — Gen Con® 2000 update, news and information you don't want to miss (and if you do, skip to Coming Attractions on page 9).

Page 9 — Coming Attractions

Wow, Palladium has a lot of cool sourcebooks in the works, with the *Library of Bletherad*, *Coalition Wars* *Siege on Tolkeen™ One* already at the printers and work on *Wayne Breaux's Galaxy Guide™*, *Bill Coffin's Gramercy Island™*, *Coalition Wars Two: CS Overkill* and other project well under way. Check out this section for all the delicious details.

Page 12 — Coalition Wars

The *Coalition Wars: Siege on Tolkeen™* series is described, with a focus on the first two books in the series (available now!).

Page 15 — "Fantasy role-playing"

is our middle name

And don't you forget it! Palladium Books first big role-playing release was the ever-popular *Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game®* (now in its *Second Edition*). If you like *Rifts®* and our other games, you'll love *Palladium Fantasy*. And we have all kinds of new sourcebooks coming out for it throughout the year.

Page 17 — Optional Combat Rules

For *Rifts®* & Other Games

Matthew Olsson offers readers his own house rules and modifications involving *Hand to Hand* and long-range combat.

These are not sanctioned by Palladium, but they are an interesting read that should stimulate ideas.

Page 22 — *Heroes Unlimited™*, 2nd Edition

Optional New Super Powers

Nick Luna, Jason Lukowski, Ledand Smith and Richard Winters join forces to present a number of new and variant super abilities. Wayne Breaux Jr. does the artwork.

Page 28 — *Rifts®* Game Master Tips

Suggestions, and good advice

Hugh King offers excellent observations, comments, tips and suggestions on playing Practitioners of Magic in the *Rifts® RPG*. Although the focus is *Rifts®*, the advice is priceless and suitable for most any game (especially the section on *Role-Playing Strategically* and *Use Imagination*). Plus this article is a fun and insightful read. Siembieda says, don't pass it up!

Artwork is by Apollo Okamura — don't you just love the illustration on page 33?

Page 48 — *Palladium Megaverse®*

Questions and Answers

Direct from the web, Rodney Stott and Shawn Merrow present the first in a continuing series of "Questions and Answers." Hopefully these answers to frequently asked questions will shed light and understanding upon various rules and misconceptions.

Artwork is by Brandon C. Clark and Apollo Okamura.

Page 53 — *Rifts®* Lone Star™ Comic Strip

Ramon Perez presents the latest installment of his *Rifts®* Comic Strip. This issue starts out with action and intrigue and ends with ... um ... action and intrigue. It's great stuff as only Ramon can dish it out.

Part Six of "Seven" chapters by *Ramon Perez* (Penciler, Inker, Letterer, and Writer).

Don't miss the explosive conclusion in *The Rifter® #12*.

Page 63 — *Nightbane®* RPG

"The Nightbane"

Kevin Siembieda takes a look at the *Nightbane* themselves in a short tale that serves as something of an introduction to William Muench's *Gregor's Chronicle* story. It offers insight into the *Nightbane*, their struggle against the *Nightlords*, their purpose and introduces the *Salvation of Light*.

Page 65 — *Nightbane®* RPG Short Story

Gregor's Chronicle: The Tale of a Lost Boy

William Muench weaves a tale of confrontation and survival set in the world of *The Nightbane®*.

Page 69 art by R.K. Post.

Page 76 — Rifts® T-shirts

Just what you need this summer, eh? All the fashion-conscious Nightbane and Superheroes are wearing one, shouldn't you?

Page 79 — The Palladium Fantasy RPG®

The Shrine of Ventax — Adventure

Michael Long whips up Palladium Fantasy adventure suitable for mid-level characters (and easily modified to accommodate all others), set in the border lands between the *Eastern Territory* and the *Old Kingdom*. Defenseless farmers, a dangerous dungeon, treasure, mystery, combat, heroism, marauding Orcs, Ratlings, the Dread-Lord, and fun! A full-length, 29 page adventure!

Artwork by the gents at Drunken Style Studio: Mark Dudley, Brandon C. Clark, and Ka Xiong. Maps by Michael Long.

Page 107— Hammer of the Forge

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

The Cover

The cover to **The Rifter® #11** is something that artist *Scott Johnson* was doodling around with on the computer. Kevin thought it fit in very nicely to the central theme of this issue — “magic” and “fantasy.” We liked it, Scott tweaked it, and hear it is for your enjoyment.

Optional and Unofficial Rules & Source Material

Please note that most of the material presented in **The Rifter®** is “unofficial” or “optional” rules and source material. They are alternative ideas and things one can include in his campaign or enjoy reading. They are not “official” to the main games or world settings. As for optional tables and adventures, if they sound cool or fun, use them. If they sound funky, too high-powered or inappropriate for your game, modify them or ignore them completely. All the material in **The Rifter®** has been included for two reasons: One, because we thought it was imaginative and fun, and two, we thought it would stimulate your imagination with fun stuff that you can use (if you want) or which might inspire you to create your own wonders.

www.palladiumbooks.com — Palladium On-Line

Coming Next Issue ...

The Rifter® #12

- The conclusion of the *Rifts® Lone Star* comic strip.
- The return of *Knights of the Dinner Table®* (we hope).
- Material for *The Palladium Fantasy RPG®*.
- Material for *Heroes Unlimited™*.
- The next chapter of the *Hammer of the Forge™*.
- Material for *Rifts®*
- The latest news and developments at Palladium.
- Source material for the *Palladium Megaverse®*.
- New contributors and fun.

... oh, and maybe some really big news. Maybe. So please join us.





From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Adventure and surprises

That's what this year is shaping up to be
— adventure and surprises:

- Sales are up.
- Palladium's mostly on time (believe it or not).
- Choice booth for Gen Con®.
- Licensing wheeling and dealing (nothing we can reveal yet).
- Truly exciting new Palladium products.
- Support for the many Palladium Books product lines.
- Spring and summer conventions.
- And the usual wildness of this business.

The gaming industry is settling down a bit and Palladium's sales are shooting through the roof. And not just for **Rifts®** either. **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®** and **Heroes Unlimited™** lines are sizzling with excitement. Plus, we have three supplements for each slated for release in 2000 starting this summer.

Maryann and I have been wheeling and dealing on a number of fronts. One involves doing new **Robotech®** supplements and, maybe even, **Robotech 3000™** in a year or so. Another is the prospect of licensing **Rifts®** for multi-player, on-line gaming (cool, eh?), as well as a few other (still top secret) possibilities we are trying to hammer out.

I'm pumped about several projects for this year. Bill Coffin's follow-up to **Century Station™** is one. It's called **Gramercy Island™**, an HU2 sourcebook about a high security prison for superhumans. With any luck, I will follow that up with the much anticipated, **The Nursery™**, in December or January. Several books for **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®** are finally on track, too. With the first being **The Library of Bletherad™**, followed by **The Eastern Territories™** and **The Land of the Damned™**.

Currently and personally, I'm enthralled with **Coalition Wars™: Siege on Tolkeen™**. The story of this epic battle is just flowing out of me like crazy. I can hardly wait for fan feedback, because I believe this is some of my best writing for **Rifts®** ever (with a little help from Bill Coffin). As I write this, early June, the first book in the CS Wars series is done, at the printers, and will have been in stores for at least a couple weeks when you read this (ships end of June). The second book is half done, the *John Zeleznik* cover and other artwork for it are already in. Meanwhile, *Dave Dorman* is working on the next two covers. I think the entire six book series will surprise and tantalize new and long-time **Rifts®** players. And boy, oh boy are there tons of ideas for adventures! Just wait till you see what happens with the Cyber-Knights, the Dragon Kings, the big build up to the climatic finale and ... and ... oh, you'll just have to wait and see for yourselves.

Convention fun

Marcon, Columbus, Ohio, this past May, was a hoot! The convention organizers are capable and caring, which makes this science fiction convention loads of fun for everybody. Maryann, Steve and I enjoyed speaking with scores of Palladium gamers from all over the Midwest, and we got to put faces to some of our on-line pals. With any luck we will be back at **Marcon** next year as exhibitors and speakers. We'll keep you posted.

By the time you read this, Maryann and I will probably be wandering the floor of the **San Diego Comic Con International**. No, Palladium doesn't have a table there. We attend the Comic Con as "fans" (okay, I'm the real fan-boy, but don't let Maryann fool you, she enjoys talking to fellow professionals and buying toys, books and artwork as much as I do). We'll also be visiting *John Zeleznik* who does have a booth where he sells piles of gorgeous, limited edition prints (check it out if you're there).

Gen Con® 2000

We haven't attended Gen Con® in a few years, so the very fact that Palladium will have a booth at **Gen Con® 2000** is a surprise, let alone the one we hoped to get. Palladium's been in business for *TWENTY YEARS* and we wanted to do something special for our 20th Anniversary. Moreover, **Gen Con® 2000** happens to coincide with *Rifts® 10 Year Anniversary* almost to the day!

The Rifts® RPG made its first appearance at the 1990 Gen Con® Game Fair. I had spent over three years quietly developing **Rifts®**, so while Alex, Thom, Maryann, and the Palladium staff felt it would do great, "I" feared we might be too close to the project and it wasn't as good as we thought. I was like a nervous, expecting father — I loved **Rifts®** and believed it was something special, but I didn't know for sure. Back then, a game world so unique, diverse and combining so many different genres had never really been done. It was a big risk, I had invested years into it, and I was very nervous. Well, we bit the bullet, pressed 10,000 copies and hoped for the best. We shipped a few thousand **Rifts®** books just before we left for the convention — distributor numbers were solid, but a bit conservative on this "new and unproven" role-playing game. **Rifts®** would be hitting store shelves around the same time that we were exhibiting at Gen Con® 1990, so people at the con would give us our first feedback. We held our breath and waited. I was delighted to sell around a hundred copies the first day of the show. We were thrilled when scores of people began coming back the next day *raving* about the game. Heck, a few had actually read the entire 250 page book in a single night (they couldn't put it down). We sold several hundred copies that weekend and felt exhilarated, but the real test would be if the darned RPG flew off store

shelves like it did off our tables at Gen Con®. We had projected that if **Rifts®** was a hit, we would sell out of the initial press run of 10,000 copies in three months. Well, we were wrong, **Rifts®** wasn't just a hit, it was a monster-hit, a mega-hit that sold out in three WEEKS! We would sell over 40,000 copies of the basic game in just the first 12 months. The rest, as they say, is history. That's one reason attending **Gen Con® 2000** is important to us, and we hope many of you will join us in the celebration and fun.

Palladium's **Gen Con®** booth is **Number 307**, right toward the front of the exhibitor's hall, kitty-corner from the WoTC Castle. We'll be loaded with all of our products, plus special

give-aways like posters and canvas tote bags. Low-lifes like me, Maryann, Ramon Perez, Scott Johnson, Ben Cassin Lucas, Wayne Smith, and Steve Sheiring will be available to sign autographs and engage in a little friendly chitchat (when we're not too busy). The **Limited Edition Heroes Unlimited™ Hardcover Edition** as well as **Coalition Wars™ Two: CS Overkill, T-shirts, and miniatures**, along with the rest of our line, will all be available while supplies last. We don't know if we'll be back to Gen Con® next year — 'cuz this is our big Anniversary Celebration — hope to see a lot of you there.

— Kevin Siembieda, 2000

News

By Kevin Siembieda, the guy who should know



some silly things like *Psi-Cola Water Bottles* and nifty canvas bags (the bags are free with any purchase over \$15 bucks).

Plus, meet with (if you dare) and get autographs (if you want 'em) from ...

Kevin Siembieda

Maryann Siembieda

Ramon Perez

Scott Johnson

Wayne Smith

Steve Sheiring

Ben Lucas, all the way from Australia (no kidding!)

Erick Wujcik will be around too, but he'll spend most of his time at the *Phage Press Booth*. Rumor has it that Erick will have a new product or two for his company so swing on by.

But that's not all! All of you who have mailed Palladium submissions for **The Rifter®** but have NEVER gotten a reply can personally badger Wayne in person (he'll be the tall guy wearing glasses (or contacts) and a bullet-proof vest).

Late breaking news!

Bill Coffin's newest creation

Holy cow! We knew Bill was a prolific writer, but now he's a Daddy, too!!

Bill and Allison Coffin (okay, Alli did all the *hard* work) gave birth to a beautiful, six (or was it eight?) pound, baby girl — "Fiona Rae" — around 1:00 pm, Wednesday, June 21, 2000. (The first of many?)

Palladium's staff sends the proud Momma and Pappa our heart-felt congratulations and warmest regards!!! We look forward to getting more baby pictures.

Gen Con® 2000

Palladium's Booth is #307

Hey, a whole bunch of you guys and gals had better show up with fists full of dollars to spend at the Palladium table, because this convention is costing us a fortune.

We'll bring the newest releases, HU2 hardcover limited edition, novels, T-Shirts, new posters, and all the books we can truck in. We'll have original artwork for sale too, along with

There's no place like home

He was here and now he's not. Blink and you missed it. Talented artist, Ryan Beres, decided home was the place to be, so he has left Palladium's employment and moved back to Washington.

Where's KODT this issue?

Sorry, Jolly Blackburn was buried with work at **Kenzer & Co.** doing the KODT comic book and working on so many other projects, that he couldn't get a strip to us this issue. Hey, don't blame Jolly, he's like a famous, big-time comic book artist (he's not one, but he's "like" one). Besides, Wayne Smith didn't call Jolly to remind him with enough lead time. Sheesh, some Editor-in-Chief.

I guess Wayne's still dazed and reeling from **The Rifter #9 1/2**.

More Rifts® Novels

We have been talking to a couple of writers about writing a few new novels. If things go well, you can expect one early next year.

We have also been kicking around the idea of doing a Palladium Fantasy novel or two. Only time will tell.

Get those The Rifter® #13 submissions in soon

We thought it would be fun to include source material and adventures based on superstitions, the number “13,” curses and spooky stuff for the *Thirteenth* issue of **The Rifter®**. **Beyond the Supernatural™** and **Nightbane®** are ideal for this, but so are **Rifts®**, **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Mystic China™**, and **Palladium Fantasy®**. Submissions can be tongue-in-cheek or serious horror. We’ve gotten only two so far, so get moving folks!

Deadline: October 12th (I mentioned November 1st, last issue, but that’s a little late. We need it by October 12th)

Coming Attractions

The following books are actually in production and *will* see print this year.

Palladium Fantasy: Library of Bletherad™ — July 25

Rifts®: Coalition Wars: Tolkeen 2, CS Overkill™ — Aug. 2

Rifts®: Coalition Wars: Siege on Tolkeen 3 — end of September

Rifts®: Coalition Wars: Siege on Tolkeen 4-6 — Fall

The Rifter® #12 — October

Palladium Fantasy®: Eastern Territory™ — Sept. or Oct.

Palladium Fantasy®: Land of the Damned™ — November

Heroes Unlimited™: Galaxy Guide™ — Fall

Heroes Unlimited™: Gramercy Island — Fall

Heroes Unlimited™: Hardware Unlimited™ — Fall

And, with any luck a couple of the following ...

Rifts®: Australia Two™

Rifts®: Australia Three™

Rifts® Anvil Galaxy™ (Phase World® sourcebook)

Heroes Unlimited™: Mutant Underground™

Ninjas & Superspies™ sourcebook

and maybe a few other odds and ends.

Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Ed. “Hardcover” Limited Edition.

Available August 2, 2000, a signed and numbered, hardcover, collector’s edition of **Heroes Unlimited™, Second Edition**. Featuring a specially commissioned double-page battle scene by *Ramon Perez*. Signed and numbered by Ramon Perez and Kevin Siembieda.

- 600 signed and numbered copies.
- A classy blue leatherette (imitation leather) cover.
- Interior pages are sewn and will not fall out.
- Dynamic *Ramon Perez* artwork for end sheets.
- Signed and numbered by Kevin Siembieda and Ramon Perez.

RiftsworkZ™ Two

The art of John Zeleznik — Fall release

Another gorgeous art portfolio of John Zeleznik’s **Rifts®** covers, plus a little seen **Skrappers** concept painting of a Blhaze Alien (a black and white version appears on page 56 of *Skrappers*).

- Six large prints suitable for framing. **Rifts® Sonic Boom, Warlords of Russia™, Mystic Russia™, Rifts® Australia, Rifts Canada™, and Blhaze™ Alien** (Skrappers concept painting). Limited to 2000 portfolios. Collector’s item!
- Each print is a large 11x14 inches.
- Comes with a signed certificate of authenticity.
- Signed and numbered by John Zeleznik. \$29.95 retail.
- Rescheduled for a Fall release. Great for X-Mas.

- \$40.00 retail plus \$5.00 for postage and handling.
- Cat. No. 5500
- Available while supplies last.

HU2 Aliens Unlimited™ Companion Galaxy Guide™

Wayne Breaux strikes back ... er, strikes again ... with his **Aliens Unlimited™ Galaxy Guide**.

Wayne goes all out with space travel and combat rules, spaceship creation, new weapons and equipment, bad guys, and information about the people and civilizations presented in **Aliens Unlimited™**.

Note: Probably a 200+ page whopper for August or September, 2000. Written by Wayne Breaux with additional material by Kevin Siembieda. Art by Wilson, Breaux, Williams and others.

HU2 Century Station™ Gramercy Island™

Bill Coffin explores the inner sanctum of the Century Station’s notorious **Gramercy Island Penitentiary™** with special attention to the *Super Being Containment Wing!* Here some of the most dangerous and insane supervillains are locked away to keep the world safe. See who they are and the schemes they are hatching from behind bars — prison breaks, gang activity, and corruption of officials among them. Or to quote one criminal mastermind behind bars, “Just because you’re imprisoned doesn’t mean your life on the outside comes to an end. Well, not if you’re me.”

Additional information includes the special (sometimes experimental and questionably humane) devices and measures for containing super beings, the layout of the Penitentiary, prison security, potential weaknesses, riot control, prison gangs, prison society, manhunts and treachery. Not to mention more about

Century Station and its heroes, villains, and adventures. And more great ideas and artwork.

Note: Final size and release date not yet determined. Probably 160 pages for a Fall, 2000 release. Written by Bill Coffin.



Rifts® Free Quebec™

Available now!

Free Quebec is a jumping off point for the **Coalition Wars: Siege on Tolkeen**. After all, it is another major war front, a continuing source of trouble for the Coalition States, and leaves CS troops vulnerable to attack.

- Background on the nation and city of Free Quebec.
- The City of Old Bones, full of intrigue and treachery.
- Emphasis on the Quebec Military.
- New Glitter Boys, V-SAM and other power armor.
- Combat vehicles and weapons exclusive to Free Quebec.
- Cyborgs unique to Free Quebec.
- Coalition and Free Quebec war plans.
- Hints and information about the Siege on Tolkeen.
- War! Effectively Coalition vs Coalition as the CS faces off against Free Quebec.
- Artwork by Perez, Wilson, Breaux, Johnson, Beres and others.
- Over 192 pages, written by Kevin Siembieda and Francois DesRochers.
- \$20.95 retail. Don't miss it!

HU2: Mutant Underground™

Who speaks for the intelligent animals, genetic creations of science, freaks and frightened superbeings branded as "mutants?"

Where does the creation of an experiment gone wrong go when it escapes its creator?

How do they live?

What forces shape them into heroes or monsters?

When will the governments (and people at large) accept these "super freaks" and "experiments" as viable living beings and not property?

Mutant Underground addresses these and many other questions, and much, much more. This **Heroes Unlimited™** adventure sourcebook will present superpowered mutants, animal mutants, weird side effects to super abilities, the secret organization known as the *Mutant Underground*, adventure ideas and more.

Note: Final size and release date not yet determined. Probably 160 pages, Fall, 2000. Written by Kevin Siembieda.



THE RIFTER[®] #9 1/2

April Fool's Day Special



What?! You haven't even heard of it?! That's because it has been a top secret project that just shipped to the stores (should be on shelves in time for **April Fool's Day**).

If you don't get this hilarious "one-shot" special you are missing out on a real treat.

The **Rifter #9 1/2 Special** is filled with fun and funny source-material for *Rifts*[®], *Heroes Unlimited*[™], and *The Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game*[®]. The whole thing is a hoot to read, and most of it is actually useful stuff for gaming.

Highlights include:

- **Giga-Damage** by Bill Coffin. The next BIG thing in gaming.
- **Defective Super Abilities** by Steve Sheiring and Kevin Siembieda. Not all super abilities work quite the way one might want them too. Why do dogs howl when your sonic hero runs through the neighborhood or light bulbs pop when your character touches a lamp (a hair-raising experience)? Find out.
- **The Food Manipulation Super Ability** by Steve Sheiring and Kevin Siembieda. Never underestimate the power of beans, bananas, fruit pies or Twinkies! Read this and you'll know why.
- **Unlikely Gods** like Geshbourn the God of Lost Causes and the Goddess of Cooking by Julius Rosenstein & Siembieda. For *Rifts*[®] and *Palladium Fantasy*.
- **Where's Wayne HU2 Adventure** — Wayne Smith has been kidnapped by the dangerous and unstable supervillain group known as the *Motown Maniacs*. Unless Wayne can be found and rescued, **The Rifter**[®] will be late for the first time ever! Only you can help!!
- **Wacky Superhumans** like Squish[™], Rocket Dog[™], Frank & Beanz[™], Razorfish[™], Vaudevillain[™], and a dozen others! *Heroes Unlimited, 2nd Edition* villains and heroes by a bunch of us.
- **"The" Tourist O.C.C.** — something of a superbeing in their own right, this is a dimensional traveler to be feared! Travelers with strange powers and magical objects like Bermuda Shorts, Hawaiian Shirts, Cameras, Luggage and more! Written by Rodney Stott. Suitable for use in any Palladium role-playing game. Three Rifts adventures are suggested.



- **Trickster & Ludicrous Mage O.C.C.s.** A pair of uncommon practitioners of magic for use in *Rifts*[®], *The Palladium Fantasy RPG*[™], or *Heroes Unlimited*[™]. Dozens of spells like Card Daggers, Stairway to Heaven, 52 Card Pick-Up, Bubblegum Flight, Cloud of Laughter, Fart Blossom, Water Balloons, and more. By Daniel Denis and Kevin Siembieda.
- **Crazy Accoloth's Discount Alchemy Summer Catalog.** Chain Mail Bikinis, Thumblers, and more by Alli Coffin.
- **Crazy news and coming attractions.**
- **Questions and Answers** to some of the silliest things you can imagine.
- **A Dog Boy Story** by Jim Osten, and silliness of all kinds!
- **Great Art** by Wilson, Perez, Beres, Johnson and others!
- **Collector's Item.** This April Fool's Day spectacular is a "one-shot" that will NOT be reprinted. Only 10,000 copies have been printed (issue number one of **The Rifter**[™] has sold over 20,000) and that will be it. We all want **The Rifter #9 1/2** to become legendary, so it is limited to this one and only printing.
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Optional Supplemental Combat Rules



For Rifts[®] and Other Games

By Matthew Olson

Editor's Note: Regular readers of *The Rifter*[®] may have noticed that previous issues have not included many examples of optional rules, at least not those which replace or directly contradict the official rules in any of our games. However, many readers have commented that they would like to see examples of "house rules" and other optional rules, as alternative ways of resolving things within the game, such as combat, character creation, level advancement, and so on. Palladium Books has always encouraged Game Masters to change our rules in any way they like, to suit their individual game or style of play. The article below is an example of one Game Master's house rules for ranged combat that work very well in his game, and might find a place in yours.

I just wanted to stress that these are *optional* rules, just an example of another way to handle ranged combat.

Ranged Combat

Though the Palladium game system covers Hand to Hand combat fairly well with its level progression charts, it leaves ranged combat unrefined. I felt that combat with modern and high tech weapons would benefit from the same structured progression Hand to Hand receives. At the same time, I felt that such a system would also be an ideal umbrella to further refine some of the debated game mechanics, such as bursts, ammo consumption, and the dreaded and loathed -10 to Dodge penalty.

It is no coincidence that there are four Ranged Combat levels of ability presented here. They are intended to compliment the four main Hand to Hand styles, roughly sharing the same level of ability. Ranged Combat: Rogue is intended to be the equivalent to Hand to Hand: Basic, as is Ranged Combat: Special Forces to be the equivalent to Hand to Hand: Martial Arts. The parallel ranged forms designate the starting abilities of each character with the use of modern and high-tech ranged weapons. So every character would be assigned a Ranged Combat form based upon their "base" Hand to Hand abilities.

Hand to Hand: Basic = Ranged Combat: Rogue

Hand to Hand: Expert = Ranged Combat: Infantry

Hand to Hand: Martial Arts = Ranged Combat: Special Forces

Hand to Hand: Assassin = Ranged Combat: Sniper

O.C.C.s and R.C.C.s are assigned the Ranged Combat forms that correspond to their "Base" Hand to Hand ability. The "Base" ability for Hand to Hand is what the character is assigned in the O.C.C. Skill list before it is upgraded to any superior Hand to Hand abilities available, if any. Attaining a better Hand to Hand fighting form does NOT automatically improve one's Ranged Combat to a corresponding level of ability, and vice versa. Upgrading to a superior Ranged Combat form costs TWICE the amount of skills as it would cost that particular O.C.C. or R.C.C. to improve to a superior Hand to Hand ability. For example; A CS Grunt starts out with a "Base" ability of Hand to Hand: Expert, which can be upgraded to Hand to Hand: Martial Arts at the cost of one "Other" skill, and Hand to Hand: Assassin at the cost of two "Other" skills. This would mean that he would get Ranged Combat: Infantry automatically since that corresponds with the Hand to Hand: Expert the Grunt starts with. If the Grunt improved his Hand to Hand abilities to Martial Arts (at the cost of one Other skill), his Ranged Combat ability would remain at the Infantry level. Conversely, if he improved his Ranged Combat ability to the Special Forces level (at the cost of TWO Other skills, double the cost of Martial Arts, Special Forces' corresponding form), his Hand to Hand abilities wouldn't automatically improve to Martial Arts either. Hand to Hand and Ranged Combat skills improve independent of each other, though they share a common starting point.

Characters that do not get a Hand to Hand starting point in their O.C.C. Skills (like the Rogue Scientist), are allowed to start with the Rogue form of Ranged Combat if and when the character gets Hand to Hand: Basic in his Related/Other Skills.

O.C.C.s that have a "base" Hand to Hand ability of Com-mando may choose either Ranged Combat: Special Forces or Ranged Combat: Sniper at no additional cost.

Characters that have their own special Hand to Hand abilities (like many of those in *Rifts: Japan*), and O.C.C.s specifically geared for hand to hand combat, should start with either Ranged Combat: Infantry or Ranged Combat: Rogue if they lack any W.P.s for modern or high-tech weapons in their O.C.C. Skill list.



Just like Hand to Hand abilities, certain O.C.C.s and R.C.C.s are restricted from getting certain Ranged Combat forms. These restrictions mirror those of Hand to Hand. So if the character's O.C.C. doesn't offer Hand to Hand: Martial Arts or Assassin, it can be assumed that their counterparts, Ranged Combat: Special Forces and Sniper, are not available to the character either.

The abilities acquired through the following ranged combat forms are only applicable to weapons for which the character has the appropriate Weapon Proficiencies. All weapons used by the character which he does not have the W.P. for, are allowed to use the Level 1 burst damage multiples in addition to suffering from the usual penalties (see below). Weapon Proficiencies acquired later, when the character is of a higher level, start using this table at level 1 (one) proficiency, not the character's current level of experience.

Ranged Combat: Rogue

Those who have not had the benefit of any kind of formal training in the use of small arms use the Rogue style. Many of those who use this style are self-taught and learn through observation, sometimes from the wrong places like glorified movies and unrealistic TV programs. Consequently, many wield their weapons improperly, like those who hold their pistols sideways because it looks cool, or shoot from the hip because that's how good old John Wayne did it in his westerns. Because of these shortcomings, it should be noted that skill development for those with the Rogue form is a bit stunted. This form also represents those who did receive some formal training, but were rushed through so they could focus on other fields of study.

Level 1: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X3, Long Burst: X4).

Level 2: (No bonuses or abilities given)

Level 3: Imposed Dodge Penalty (-2 for target to dodge attacks from High Tech Weapons, -1 to dodge attacks from Modern Conventional Weapons).

Level 4: +1 to hit (Applicable to attacks that are aimed, burst/pulse, or wild).

Level 5: Coldcock.

Level 6: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X4, Long Burst: X6); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

Level 7: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge).

Level 8: Additional +1 to hit.

Level 9: Rapid Reload.

Level 10: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X3, Medium Burst: X5, Long Burst: X8).

Level 11: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge).

Level 12: Additional +1 to hit.

Level 13: Leading (+2 to hit a moving target); Automatic Critical Hit on Surprise Attack.

Level 14: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X4, Medium Burst: X7, Long Burst: X12).

Level 15: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge).

Ranged Combat: Infantry

The Infantry style should be considered comparable to what a fairly well trained soldier or mercenary is capable of. Unlike those versed in the Rogue style, they benefit from formal and professional training by veterans who have honed their skills on the field of combat. Consequently, their shooting forms are more so correct and their learning curve is average, but better than those lacking this training.

Level 1: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X3, Long Burst: X4).

Level 2: Coldcock.

Level 3: Imposed Dodge Penalty (-2 for target to dodge attacks from High Tech Weapons, -1 to dodge attacks from Modern Conventional Weapons).

Level 4: +1 to hit (Applicable to attacks that are aimed, burst/pulse, or wild).

Level 5: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X4, Long Burst: X6); Rapid Reload.

Level 6: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20.

Level 7: Additional +1 to hit; Snap Shot.

Level 8: Leading (+3 to hit a moving target).

Level 9: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X3, Medium Burst: X5, Long Burst: X8).

Level 10: Additional +1 to hit; Speed Load.

Level 11: "Aimed" Short Burst or Pulse.

Level 12: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Level 13: Automatic Critical Hit on Surprise Attack; Additional +1 to hit.

Level 14: Roll of "10" or better required to hit on a Called Shot (instead of "12"); Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X4, Medium Burst: X7, Long Burst: X12).

Level 15: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Double Critical Hit on a roll of a natural 20 (X4 damage).

Ranged Combat: Special Forces

Characters who are allowed to use this form are those trained to handle special and intense scenarios where speed and quick, decisive reactions are required while maintaining a clear head. They receive special training with lots of individual attention allowing them to have an exceptional learning curve. Examples of those with this kind of training are SEALs, SWAT and HRT teams.

Level 1: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X3, Long Burst: X4); Coldcock.

Level 2: +2 to Initiative (Applies only to ranged weapons the character has Weapon Proficiencies for).

Level 3: Imposed Dodge Penalty (-2 for target to dodge attacks from High Tech Weapons, -1 to dodge attacks from Modern Conventional Weapons).

Level 4: Rapid Reload; +1 to hit (Applicable to attacks that are aimed, burst/pulse, or wild).

Level 5: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X4, Long Burst: X6); Walking Aim.

Level 6: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 18, 19 or 20.

Level 7: Additional +2 to hit; Snap Shot.

Level 8: Additional +2 to Initiative (see above); Leading (+4 to hit a moving target).

Level 9: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X3, Medium Burst: X5, Long Burst: X8).

Level 10: Additional +2 to hit; Automatic Critical Hit on Surprise Attack.

Level 11: "Aimed" Short Burst or Pulse; Pinning Fire.

Level 12: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 17, 18, 19 or 20.

Level 13: Additional +2 to hit; Roll of "10" or better required to hit on a Called Shot (instead of "12").

Level 14: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X4, Medium Burst: X7, Long Burst: X12); Speed Loading; Additional +2 to Initiative.

Level 15: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Double Critical Hit on a roll of a natural 20 (X4 damage).

Ranged Combat: Sniper

This style is for those trained as snipers and assassins. They specialize in carefully placed, aimed shots with pinpoint accuracy. Though lacking in some areas of ranged combat, their special abilities potentially make them the most lethal of opponents one can come across.

Level 1: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X3, Long Burst: X4).

Level 2: Coldcock; Leading (+1 to hit a moving target).

Level 3: Imposed Dodge Penalty (-2 for target to dodge attacks from High Tech Weapons, -1 to dodge attacks from Modern Conventional Weapons); +2 to hit on Aimed shots.

Level 4: +1 to hit (Applicable to attacks that are aimed, burst/pulse, or wild); Double Tap.

Level 5: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X2, Medium Burst: X4, Long Burst: X6); Critical Hit on a natural roll of 19 or 20.

Level 6: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Roll of "10" or better required to hit on a Called Shot (instead of "12").

Level 7: Additional +1 to hit; Additional +1 to hit on Aimed shots.

Level 8: Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge); Leading (Additional +2 to hit a moving target).

Level 9: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X3, Medium Burst: X5, Long Burst: X8); Rapid Reload.

Level 10: Additional +1 to hit; Automatic Critical Hit on Surprise Attack.

Level 11: "Aimed" Short Burst or Pulse; Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge).

Level 12: Double Critical Hit on a roll of a natural 20 (X4 damage); Leading (Additional +2 to hit a moving target); Roll of "8" or better required to hit on a Called Shot (instead of "12").

Level 13: Additional +1 to hit on Aimed shots; Imposed Dodge Penalty (An additional -2/-1 to dodge).

Level 14: Burst Damage Multiples (Short Burst: X4, Medium Burst: X7, Long Burst: X12); Head Shot; Additional +1 to hit.

Level 15: Additional +2 to hit on Aimed shots.

Explanation of Terms

“Aimed” Short Burst (or Pulse): With this ability a character can fire a Short Burst or a pulse with the same accuracy of an Aimed shot. The +1 to hit Burst bonus may not be applied, but all other applicable bonuses are, including those for Aimed shots.

Burst Damage Multiples: Simply put, this represents how good the attacker’s groupings of shots are when firing a weapon in automatic mode in hectic combat conditions. The more experienced the character gets, the tighter his groupings of shots become.

Coldcock: This is where a person bludgeons an opponent with the butt of his weapon. The character can inflict an additional +1D4 S.D.C. from a Pistol Butt and +1D6 S.D.C. from a Rifle Butt. At level 12 the character can also “Knock Out” a target for 1D6 melees on a natural roll of 19 to 20 (like in the Boxing skill). This does not require the additional purchase of W.P. Blunt.

Double Tap: This highly feared Sniper ability allows a character to get off two (2) single shot attacks, in a single melee attack/action, at the same target. But there are some restrictions to this special attack. First, the character must be within 10 feet (3 m) of the target if using a pistol and 30 feet (9.1 m) of the target if using a rifle. These ranges are increased by +5 feet (1.5 m) per additional level of experience the character attains (i.e. a character with Ranged Combat: Sniper at 6th level proficiency could Double Tap targets at 20 feet/6.1 m and 40 feet/12.1 m respectively). Both of the shots are rolled to hit separately with only HALF their total bonuses, and can not be Wild. Firing at a second target in this way is possible if it’s close to the first from the shooter’s perspective, but the second shot is at a -6 to hit. One of the primary advantages of this ability is that the sniper can use it with ANY single shot weapon he has a W.P. for (or a weapon currently set to fire single shots).

Head Shot: This attack allows the Sniper to target the head (or any other equally difficult target) and hit it with a normal, non-called shot attack roll with all applicable bonuses. Requires one (1) full melee action to take the steady aim required for this precise strike, effectively making it use two attacks.

Imposed Dodge Penalty: This penalty does NOT apply to the shooter, it is imposed against the target the character is aiming at. The reason behind this is because more experienced characters can raise their weapon, aim and fire more quickly (but not necessarily more accurately) than those of lesser ability. Because of this, the defender has less time to react and avoid being shot by dodging before the trigger is pulled. In this sense, the act of dodging a ranged attack isn’t the act of getting out of the way of a speeding bullet or a burning laser, but anticipating where the weapon is being aimed and moving away from where the sights are assumed to be zeroed in at. NOTE: This is intended to take the place of the -10 to Dodge Energy Weapons penalty introduced in Warlords of Russia.

Leading: This is the act of aiming in the path of a moving object so the shot will hit where the target will be, instead of aiming where it’s currently at. This bonus only offsets the standard penalty of -3 to hit targets moving slower than 40 mph (64 km) and -6 to hit targets moving 40 mph (64 km) or faster. If the bonus exceeds the penalty to hit the moving target, the re-

mainder of the bonus is negated and does not count as a bonus to hit.

Pinning Fire: When using Pinning Fire, the character is saturating an area with a controlled spray of shots. Anyone in that area not protected by cover is AUTOMATICALLY hit, but a dodge is still possible. Consequently, an attack roll is still required for the benefit of the defenders’ dodge rolls. The number of targets that can be hit can not exceed half the number of shots in the burst (i.e. a 10 shot burst of Pinning fire can not damage more than five targets). Pinning Fire can be maintained for as long as the weapon’s ammo holds out. Damage: Equal to 1 single shot. No damage multiples are applicable from bursts. Auto-



matic firing Rail Guns inflict *twice* the damage of a single round if covering an area that's 6 to 7 meters/yards wide, and *three times* the damage of a single round if covering a smaller area, because of their exceptionally high cyclic rates. For example: A SAMAS with a C-40R would inflict 3D4 M.D. per target hit normally, and 2D4 M.D. per target when providing cover fire over a larger area. Area of Effect: A Short Burst can cover a 2 meter/yard wide area. A Medium Burst can cover a 3 meter/yard wide area, and a Long Burst (including rail guns) can cover a 7 meter/yard wide area. Limitation: This ability can not be used in conjunction with Rapid Reload, but can be with Speed Load.

Rapid Reload: Rapid Reload allows a character to change magazines and attack in the same melee action. The attack counts as a Wild Attack, but this does not use two melee actions.

Snap Shot: This is the ability to pop out from behind cover, fire either a short burst/pulse, or an Aimed shot with half bonuses, and return to the safety of cover, all in one melee attack. Not considered a Wild attack.

Speed Load: Basically this is an improved version of Rapid Reload. The character can reload and attack in a single melee action with no penalties and still retain HALF of all applicable bonuses to hit.

Walking Aim: Characters with this ability may walk at a fast pace (1/4 Speed max.) and still fire an Aimed shot with full bonuses and no Wild Shooting penalties.

Suggested Changes to the Rules

Standard Bursts

The number of shots used in bursts needs to be more standardized. Unless it says otherwise in a weapon's descriptive text, Short Bursts should use five (5) shots, Medium Bursts should consume ten (10) shots, and Long Bursts should blow off twenty (20) shots. This will allow magazines and E-clips with higher capacities to actually have more firepower and utilize their larger payloads more efficiently, as they should.

Short Bursts consisting of 2 to 4 rounds are also possible *IF and only if* the weapon's magazine only has that many rounds left. But such bursts have a maximum "Burst Damage Multiple" of times two (X2) regardless of the character's experience level, and consume the remainder of the magazine. This would come into play with weapons like the Naruni NE-2L Autopistol and the Colt 1911 in .38 Super, which have a payload of 9 rounds, allowing them to fire a conventional five round Short Burst with full benefits from experience, and a four round Short Burst without those benefits.

Shooting Wild

The Wild Shooting rules need a revision as well. I'd recommend the following changes:

1. Making the act of Shooting Wild only use a single action, instead of two (unless a Long Burst is used, of course).
2. The character Shooting Wild should be allowed to use Single Shots and Short Bursts, instead of being forced to use Medium and Long Bursts exclusively.

3. And lastly, in place of a standardized X2 Damage Multiple (regardless of burst size), impose a Wild Shooting penalty of -1 to the Damage Multiple of Short and Medium Bursts, and a -2 for Long Bursts. For Example; a Medium Burst that normally has a X3 multiple would be reduced to a X2, and a Long Burst that normally has a X8 multiple would be reduced to a X6).

Standard Rate of Fire

And lastly, the definition of "Standard Rate of Fire" needs to be well defined. I recommend the Standard Rate of Fire of modern weapons be determined by W.P. category, as follows:

W.P. Revolver: Each depression of the trigger uses a single melee action. No bursts are possible with single action revolvers; (pump weapons like shotguns and the TX-5 fall into this single action category for Rate of Fire purposes only). A Short Burst is possible with a double action revolver, but consumes the weapon's entire payload.

W.P. Automatic Pistol: The weapon can fire Single Aimed Shots or Short Bursts. If the weapon's payload is 8 rounds or less, all the ammunition is consumed in the Short Burst. Otherwise its Short Bursts only use 5 shots.

W.P. Bolt Action Rifle: Each depression of the trigger uses a single melee action. Also, the act of working the bolt to cycle in a new round from the magazine uses a melee action as well.

W.P. Automatic and Semi-automatic Rifles: These weapons can fire Aimed Shots and Bursts of all description. However, semi-automatics can not fire Long Bursts.

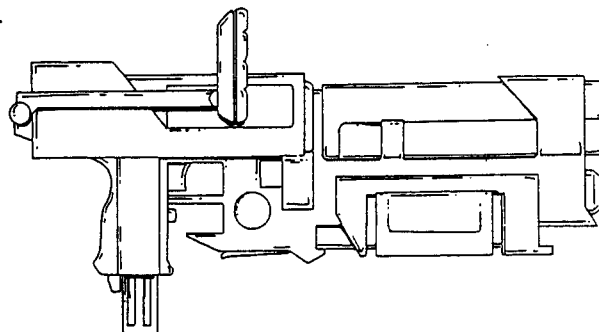
W.P. Sub-Machinegun: These weapons can fire Aimed Shots and Bursts of all description.

W.P. Heavy: Given the wide variety of weapons this W.P. encompasses, every weapon is to be treated on a case by case basis. Machineguns obviously can fire all kinds of Bursts but few can fire Single Aimed Shots. Bazookas can be fired up to three times a melee round if operated by a two-man team, but only once per melee round if operated by a single person. LAWS rockets only require a single action to open, and a single action to fire, but they can not be reloaded. And Mortars can be fired at a rate equal to a character's hand to hand attacks (once per melee action), but require a melee action to adjust their trajectory and aim.

W.P. Energy Pistol: The weapon can fire Single Aimed Shots or Short Bursts by rapidly depressing the trigger.

W.P. Energy Rifle: These weapons can fire Aimed Shots and Bursts of any size. However, semi-automatics can not fire Long Bursts.

W.P. Heavy Energy Weapons: Typically, each depression of the trigger uses a single melee action resulting in a single shot being fired. Rail guns usually have their own special rates of fire.



Super Powers

Optional New Super Abilities for Heroes Unlimited™

Minor Abilities

Clairaudience (Hear)/Clairvoyance (See)

By Nick Luna

The character can “see” or “hear” sounds and events at great distances, despite any intervening barriers. Activating these powers requires one round of concentration. These powers are not affected by the speed of either light or sound.

If this power is generated, there is a 50/50 chance for either version.

Range:

1-3rd Level: 5 miles (8 km) per level of experience.

4-6th Level: 6 miles (9.6 km) per level of experience.

7-9th Level: 7 miles (11.2 km) per level of experience.

10-12th Level: 8 miles (12.8 km) per level of experience.

13-15th Level: 9 miles (14.4 km) per level of experience.

Duration: Concentration (½ Spd, attacks per round, and combat bonuses).

The character ignores intervening structures, since this is a psionic-type ability, but he cannot see or hear if the target area is protected from psionic scans.

Corrosive Sweat

By Nick Luna

The hero with this power is able to secrete an acidic substance from his skin. This is usually caused by an odd combination of chemicals in the character’s body. The hero is able to gather his sweat and throw it.

Range: 8-10 feet (2.4-3 m).

Damage: 1D4x10 per melee round.

Duration: Burns for 1D4 rounds.

Rate of Fire: Equal to Hand-to-Hand attacks.

Rifts Note: If the hero is M.D.C. (because of other powers or circumstances), so is his sweat.

Note: Upon selection of this power, there is a 25% chance that this power is constant.

Danger Sense

By Nick Luna

The hero has the ability to sense immediate personal danger. This power does not inform him of the nature, source, or direction of the danger. The warning time is 3 seconds per level.

Bonuses:

+1D4 M.E.

+2 to initiative

+1 to parry

+6 to dodge

Cannot be attacked by surprise.

Energy Expulsion: Exploding Spheres

By Nick Luna

The hero is able to create spheres of energy that explode, inflicting kinetic energy damage. The spheres are mentally controlled and can be directed toward a target. The spheres are initially about 6 inches (15 cm) in diameter, but each additional 1D6 of damage potential increases this by 4 inches (10 cm).

Range: 30 feet + 5 feet (9.1 + 1.5 m) per level.

Damage: 1D6, + 1D6 per each 2 additional levels of experience.

Area Affected: 3 foot (.9 m) diameter, + 3 feet (.9 m) per level.

Number of Spheres per action: 1, + 1 every 3 levels.

Speed: 5, + 1 per level of experience, or they can be thrown.

Timing: The spheres are like time bombs, and can be set to explode on impact, or delayed up to 15 seconds per level.

The hero can reabsorb the spheres before they detonate, without harm.

Rifts Note: Range is 150 feet (45.7 m), and the spheres inflict Mega-Damage.

Energy Expulsion: Explosive

By Jason Lukowski & Leland Smith

This impressive expulsion power allows the character to turn any object into a bomb.

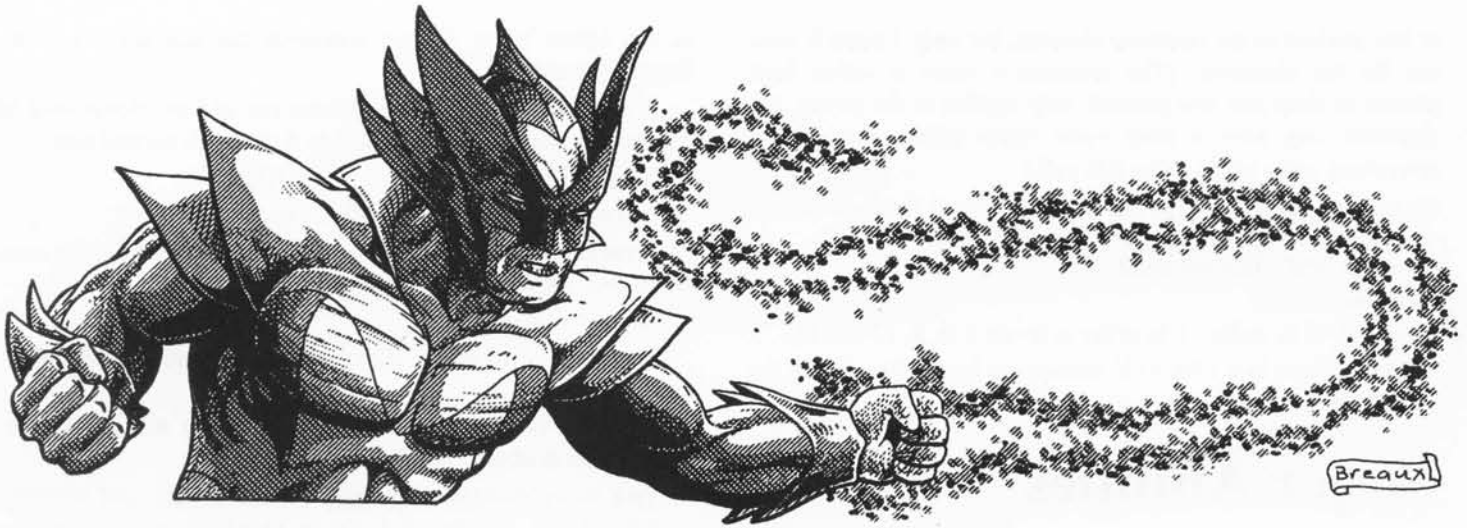
Charge Objects to Explode on Impact: Can charge and throw an item of up to 5 S.D.C. per level of experience in one attack. Larger objects can be charged by spending additional attacks. For example: If a second level character wanted to charge and throw a shovel with 25 S.D.C., it would take him three attacks (he can charge ten S.D.C. per attack spent).

Damage for items under 10 S.D.C. is 2D6, +1D6 per each additional level of experience. Larger objects inflict an additional 1D6 per every 10 S.D.C. of the object. Using the example above, the shovel will do 3D6 from the character’s level and 2D6 from the size. That is 5D6 points of damage from the charged shovel. Any object used this way is destroyed in the attack.

Range: Double normal range of thrown object, with a minimum of 30 feet (15.2 m) +5 feet (1.5 m) per level for any charged object. This includes pencils, paper clips, greeting cards, and other small objects that would not normally be able to be thrown.

Optional — Can be used as a Major Power with the following additions:

Timed Option: The character can delay the explosion for up to 1 minute per level of experience. During the last two melees, the object will begin to pulse with the explosive power to be released. Damage and limitations are as stated above. The character can charge multiple objects, up to his/her current level (a fourth level hero could have four timed explosions counting down at once).



Energy Whip

By Richard Winters

The character can form a whip out of pure energy. It can be an extension of the hand, form as a tail, come out of the shoulder, or whatever. It always works the same no matter where it appears.

Range: 6 feet (1.8 m) +1 foot (.3 m) per additional level of experience.

Duration: Instant and permanent until canceled.

Damage: 3D6 +P.S. damage bonus, +1D6 per additional level.

Other Bonuses: Can create an extra whip at levels 2, 5 and 10.

+1 to strike at levels 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13.

+1 to damage at levels 4, 8 and 12.

+1 to entangle at levels 2, 6, 8, 10 and 14.

Enhanced Leaping

By Nick Luna

Range: Self.

The character's leg strength has increased to the point where the hero is literally able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Characters can leap P.S. x 10 feet (x3 m; x15 feet/4.6 m if Extraordinary, x25 feet/7.6 m if Superhuman, x40 feet/12.2 m if Supernatural) across, and half as much vertically.

Additionally, as long as the character lands on his feet, he can fall twice his vertical jumping distance without taking damage.

Bonuses:

+6 Spd.

The hero inflicts an additional +1D6 damage with his kicks.

+15 S.D.C.

Immovability

By Nick Luna

The hero is able to "anchor" himself to the ground by manipulating gravitons. This takes two melee actions to accomplish. Once anchored, moving the character requires a Supernatural P.S. that is greater than the hero's M.E. +2 per level.

Bonuses:

+1D6 P.S.

+1D6 P.E.

-1D6 Spd.

+3D6x10 S.D.C.

+2D6x10 lbs.

Indestructible Bones

By Leland Smith

This power makes it impossible to break or shatter the character's bones, including the skull.

Increased Damage: The punches of the character will inflict 1D8+5, and kicks will do 2D6+5.

Limited Invulnerability: Any Hit Point or S.D.C. roll that would normally break a bone is ignored.

Other Bonuses:

+1 P.S.

+1D4x10 to S.D.C.

Iron Skin

By Leland Smith

This ability gives the hero a nearly impenetrable A.R. The skin essentially hardens at the point of attack, feeling normal otherwise.

Natural A.R.: Starts out with a natural A.R. of 16. Add one point to A.R. for each additional level of experience. Rolls below the A.R. rating simply bounce off. Example: A 5th level hero would have an A.R. of 20. Any rolls below 20 (including bonuses) would not damage the character. Any roll above 20 inflicts normal damage.

Note for magical weapons and attacks requiring strike rolls:

Reduce A.R. by 3 points when defending against magic weapons.

Other Bonuses:

+1D4x10 to S.D.C.

Power Weapon

By Jason Lukowski

This power allows the character to extend a nimbus of force to surround a weapon in his hand. At third level, the character can use this power to surround two weapons at once.

Damage: The normal weapon damage plus 1D6 per level of experience.

Duration: 4 melees per level of experience. The character must wait 4 melees between uses.

Sonic Scream

By Richard Winters

This power lets the character strike and do damage to some-one/something with just a yell/scream. The yell can be as high

or low pitched as the character chooses, but only 1 pitch is chosen for the character. (The character's voice is either high pitched or deep and low pitched; only applies to the power, the character may have a deep voice when talking but a high screeching voice while using this yell.)

Range: 150 feet +10 feet per each additional level of experience.

Damage: 2D6 +1D6 per level

Duration: Instant

Bonuses: +2 to strike +1 to strike at levels 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15.

Note: There is a 15% +1% chance per level of knocking the victim down.

Major Abilities

Adrenalin Surge

By Leland Smith

The character with this major super ability gets tougher and madder with the amount of damage that he or she takes.

Additional Damage is done at a rate of +1 for each 10 points of S.D.C. damage the character takes, and +2 for each 10 Hit Points taken. For example: The super villain known as "Snowblind" takes 18 points of S.D.C. in the first melee of combat. He normally has +11 to damage. At the beginning of the second melee, Snowblind does an additional +1 to damage. Three melees later, he has taken a total of 72 points of S.D.C. and 16 Hit Points. In the beginning of the fifth melee, Snowblind will be doing +20 to damage(+11 normally, +7 from S.D.C. taken, and +2 from Hit Points taken).

Additional Attacks: These are gained at the rate of 1 for each 50 points of S.D.C. and Hit Points taken. In the above example, Snowblind would have +1 attack. If he takes 12 more points of damage (100 total), he will get a second additional attack.

Other Bonuses:

+1D4x10 to S.D.C.

+1 to P.S.

+3 to Initiative.

Alter Physical Structure: Sand

By Jason Lukowski

This major ability allows the superbeing to change his physical form to sand. Typically the character retains human shape, but he can change form at will with the following abilities:

1. Physical Attacks Do No Damage: All physical attacks such as punches, kicks, sword strikes, arrows, and bullets will simply pass through the character.

Explosions do half damage and scatter the character, taking 1D4+1 melees to reform.

Energy attacks do full damage only when the A.R. is surpassed.

Psionics do full normal damage.

A.R. 14, S.D.C. 500 (S.D.C. only applies when in sand form and is the total S.D.C., not a bonus).

2. Increased Mass and Strength: Weight is doubled, plus 1D6x10 pounds (4.5-27 kg). Add 1D6+10 to Physical Strength. This is a one time roll. Apply strength bonus for every transformation to sand. The strength is considered Superhuman (same

as the Minor super ability) whenever the character is transformed to sand.

3. Sand Behemoth: The character can add additional sand to his form to increase his mass 2, 3 or 4 times his normal size.

Range: Self.

Duration: 6 melees per level of experience.

Attacks Per Melee: The character can increase his size once per melee, which uses up 2 attacks that melee.

Bonus: +1 to Strike.

Penalties: -1 to dodge. The sand form's speed is reduced by half.

Size and Weight Bonuses: Normal weight starts at the human weight doubled, +1D6x10 lbs (4.5-27 kg).

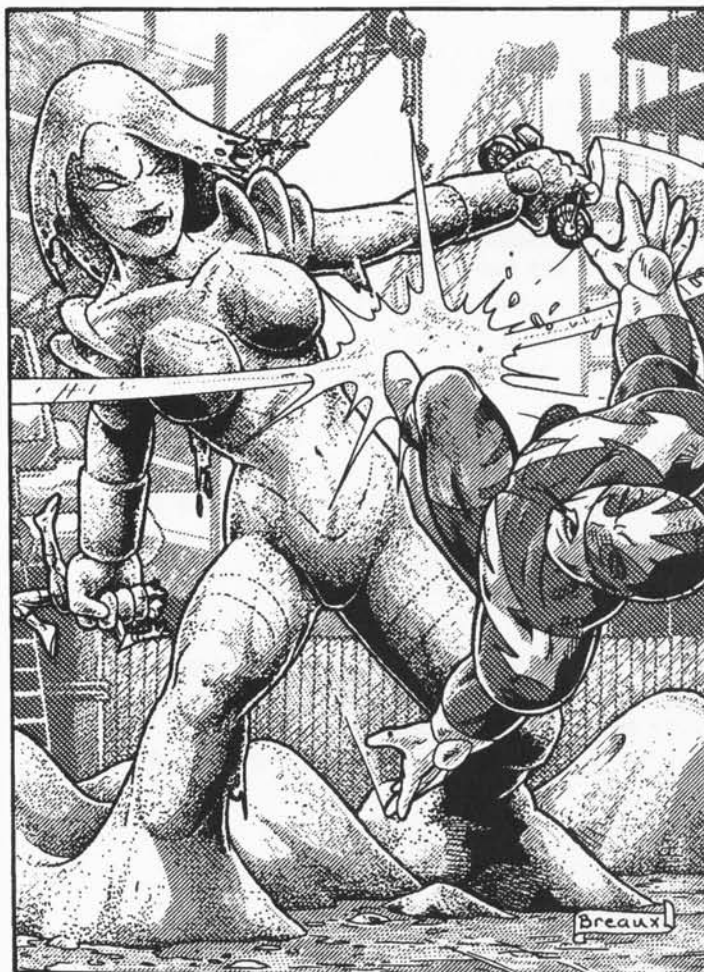
Two times normal sand form: Double height and multiply weight by four. Punches & kicks do an additional 2D6 damage (4D6 for power punches), and the sand form gains an extra 100 S.D.C.

Three times normal sand form: Triple normal height and multiply weight by 10. +3D6 for normal punches and kicks and double normal power punch. Add 170 S.D.C. at this height.

Four times normal sand form: Multiply normal height by four and weight by 60. A punch does an additional 6D6+15 damage and a kick does an additional 1D6x10 damage. Add 400 S.D.C.

Other Behemoth abilities:

Can try to bury opponents in an avalanche of sand that does 3D6 damage, up to three times per melee. Victims are at -3 to all actions during this attack.



Can create a sand storm covering a 10 foot (3 m) radius per level of experience, for 2 melees per level. Victims of the storm are at -6 to strike, parry and dodge, for the duration of the storm plus an additional 1D4 melees.

4. Other Abilities, Bonuses & Things of Note: S.D.C. of sand recovers at three times the normal rate.

The character emits no heat in sand form and is invisible to infrared and heat sensors.

Speed is reduced by half in sand form.

The character still has to breathe in sand form and is susceptible to gases, drowning, suffocation and disease in the same situations as normal humans.

Horror Factor (optional): 12 in sand form.

Alter Physical Structure: Wood

By Richard Winters

This power turns the character into a tree-like humanoid, complete with bark skin and leaf hair. While in tree form, the character can control plants to a certain degree. Also, he is stronger and more protected from damage.

1. Increased Size and Mass:

The character's weight is doubled and a foot (.3 m) is added in height when in wood form.

2. Armor Rating and S.D.C.:

When in wood form, the character has an A.R. of 14 and 400 S.D.C.

3. Limited Plant Control:

Animate and Control Plants (this is same as #1 of the super power Plant Control).

4. Shoot Arrows:

The character can generate and fire wooden arrows from his body.

Range: 250 feet +5 feet per level

Damage: 2D6 per arrow

Attacks: Equal to hand to hand attacks, but can shoot volleys of 2, 4, 6 or 8 per attack.

5. Bonuses/Abilities While in Wood Form:

Resistant to heat and cold (1/2 damage).

Can't be seen on infrared or heat sensors.

Impervious to toxic gases.

Doesn't breathe air.

S.D.C. regenerates at 4 times the normal rate.

Speed is reduced by 2 points.

6. Other Bonuses/Abilities:

Recognize and Identify Plants: 80%.

Add 4D6 to normal S.D.C. (not wood S.D.C.).

Borrow Powers

By Richard Winters

This devastating ability lets the character temporarily borrow or steal another person's powers. While the power thief is borrowing the power, the victim can't use that specific power. It's gone! The victim will be without the power until the duration of the "thief's" power has elapsed.

Range: To use this power, the character must grab and hold the victim for 1 attack, or about 3 seconds. If the hold is broken, the attempt failed. Try again.

Duration: 1D4 melees, +1D4 melees at levels 5, 10 and 15.

Damage: Only being left without a super ability for a while.

Attempts Per Melee: Can only be tried once per melee. Counts as an extra attack.

Saving Throw: Victims can try to save vs the attack but must roll 16+. Use M.E. bonuses.

Other Bonuses:

+1 to Hold at levels 1, 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Enhance Physical Structure

By Richard Winters

This power lets the character "pump himself up" for a duration, in order to withstand more damage and to heighten physical attributes.

Bonuses:

Add 200 S.D.C.

Natural A.R. of 8.

Add 10 to P.S., P.P., and P.E. (P.S. is considered Superhuman).

Add 1D6x10+10 to Spd.

Duration: 2 minutes, +1 minute at levels 3, 7, 11 and 15.

Limitation: Can only be used four times per 24 hours.

Impervious to Magic

By Richard Winters

This amazing power makes the character totally impervious to any magic spell or illusion where a save vs magic is allowed. Automatically saves. The character is still vulnerable to physical attacks such as Fireball, Call Lightning, magic weapons, etc., and full damage is taken.

Other Bonuses:

+1D6 to M.E. & P.E.

Add 20 to S.D.C.

+1 to dodge physical magic attacks.

Impervious to Psionics

By Richard Winters

This power is basically the same as Impervious to Magic except it applies to Psionics.

Bonuses:

+1D6 to M.E. & P.E.

Add +1 to I.Q.

+4 save vs insanity.

Power Fist

By Leland Smith

This power allows the hero/villain to channel incredible power to heal and cause destruction. The power appears as a glowing aura around the fist and arms.

Power Points are determined by multiplying the character's Physical Endurance by 100. For example: A character with a 14 P.E. would have 1400 power points. Add 10 power points per level of experience.

Inanimate objects can be destroyed by spending an amount of power points equal to the S.D.C. of the object. A heavy door could be demolished by spending about 100 power points.

Combat Use: Power points can be spent in combat to create a glowing aura of energy around the fist that is released on impact. For every 10 points spent, roll 1D6 for damage up to a maximum of 100 points (1D6X10), plus strength damage. Add 2 points of damage for each level of experience.

Healing: This power allows the character to increase the healing abilities of himself or others. If he concentrates for one minute and touches the recipient (including himself), his or her healing will be doubled for a 24 hour period. In addition, add +2% per level to save verses coma/death.

Cost for self: 25 Power Points.

Cost for others: 50 Power Points.

Recovery of Power Points: Power Points regenerate at a rate of 5 per hour of rest or 10 per hour of sleep or meditation.

Rechannel and Expel Energy

By Richard Winters

A character who possesses this power has the ability to absorb any energy-based attack (not kinetic) that hits him, and expel it at his attacker or another target at double its original power.

Example: A character with this power is struck with a third level Energy Expulsion: Energy blast doing 16 S.D.C. damage. The character takes no damage and can rechannel it doing 32 S.D.C. damage on his next attack, or as a simultaneous attack to whoever attacks him before his next attack. Either way, it uses 1 attack to rechannel and expel the blast.

Note: This will work on any non-kinetic energy type of attack including, but not limited to: nearly all Energy Expulsion powers, lasers, ion, particle beam weapons, Call Lightning, etc.

Other Bonuses/Abilities and Penalties:

Add 1D6x10 to S.D.C.

Impervious to pure energy attacks like lasers, Energy Expulsion, particle beams, and ion weapons.

Takes 1/2 damage from energy based magic attacks and psionic attacks, but can still rechannel and expel the energy same as above.

Takes 1/4 damage from fire and cold based energy attacks. Cannot discharge.

The character can't shoot himself to double and discharge energy. It just doesn't work and the character takes full damage from the blast. No one knows why.

The character must discharge energy stored within his next two attacks, or he will take the damage equal to what he had to discharge.

Regeneration

By Leland Smith

With this power, the character can heal incredible amounts of damage in a short amount of time.

Damage is healed at the rate of 10 S.D.C. or 5 H.P. per melee round of action or work. The healing rate can be doubled if sleeping or at complete rest.

Fingers or toes can be healed in 1 day. Hands and feet in 3 days. Entire limbs can be regenerated in 1 week.

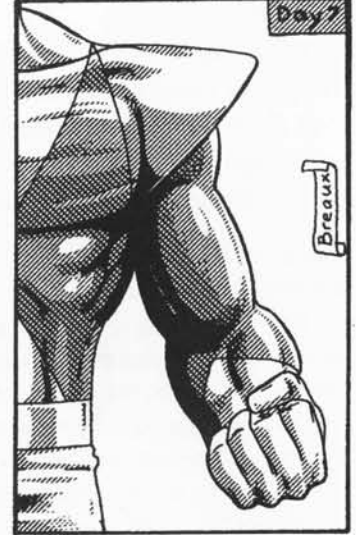
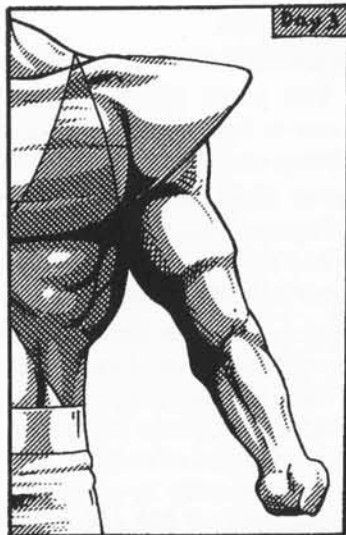
If the character's Hit Points drop below zero, the character can continue to function with 1/2 attacks and bonuses until he reaches double his P.E. attribute below zero. When damage surpasses this point, the character falls into a healing trance lasting 3D6 melees. While in the trance, the character heals 1D4X10 H.P. and 1D6X10 S.D.C. Once awake, the character begins healing as listed above. If the character passes below five times his P.E. attribute, he is truly dead.

Other Bonuses:

+6 to P.E.

+1D4X10 S.D.C.

+3D6 H.P.



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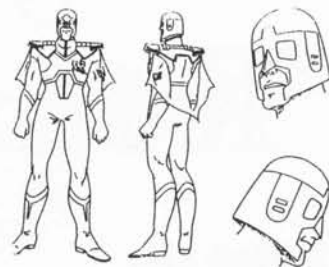


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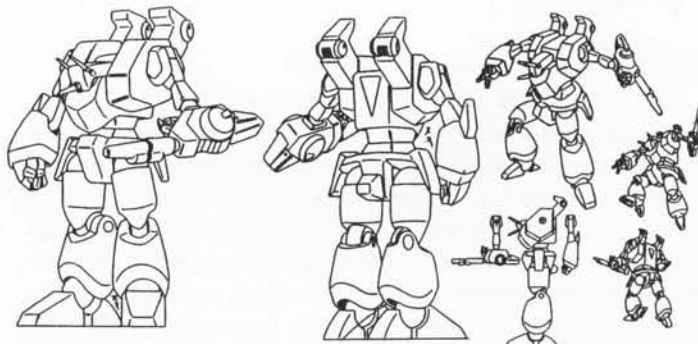
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G.M. Tips: Mages, Progression, Technology and More!

By Hugh King

Introduction

Well, here I am again to provide Game Masters with more advice and tips. Yet again, these mostly come through playing in actual games and a sudden realization on my part that some of these things I'm seeing may be going completely unnoticed by the typical gaming group, but may affect the fun of the game. I hope you find them useful or some food for thought.



Spellcasters

Let's Talk About Mages

Well, a lot of this essay is going to be with regard to mages, particularly ones like Ley Line Walkers that can learn any spell at any time. It will also include all other progressive characters that start weak and who gain power as they advance, usually through increasing in levels. These include psychics, like Mind Melters, and other characters who obviously become much more powerful as they increase in level. However, you will probably notice a very strong tendency for me to keep using or referring

to the mage or Line Walker over and over, far more so than any other class. This is because the Line Walker really does have almost unlimited potential, and that potential can be realized nearly instantly if they can find the right people to teach them the right spells. That potential can make them harder to Game Master properly, since many G.M.s are justifiably quite leery of having characters who quickly gain far too much power. The best and simplest advice I can give is to try not to go to extremes, be it keeping mages at 1st level forever, or rocketing to 15th and becoming insanely powerful in the blink of an eye. I will tend to use the examples of what I see occurring most often in games and try to give tips and help as to how to manage these situations for G.M.s who may be looking for a few ideas.

It should also be noted when I talk about mages throughout this essay that I am generally referring to Line Walkers that are normal humans, not aliens and D-Bees with tons of M.D.C., extra abilities, and natural magic and psionic powers out the wazoo. I'm talking about Joe Smith, who decided to pursue magic as his chosen career or profession, and who is biologically a completely normal human (yeah, he has all 9s for attributes too!).

Wizards Should Use Magic — Duh!

One thing that bugs me about Rifts mages is that it seems a lot of the time, maybe even the majority, mages are better off relying on technology than their magic, or there doesn't seem to be much reason to use magic. "Hm, I can Fire Bolt that guy eight times completely depleting my P.P.E., or I can shoot him with my gun and only use my ammunition. Both do the same damage and the gun can shoot twice as far (or more likely, lots more than that). Guess I'll use my gun." The worst part is, many times this may actually make the most sense, but it detracts from the whole character of a mage. Sure they can use technology, and they will, but they know magic is superior (or at least *they* think so) so they will have a very strong tendency to prefer using it over feeble technology (see below).

If you ask me, a mage's first thought of recourse or action in almost *any* given situation should be to use their magic, or to think how they can use it to deal with the situation. That doesn't necessarily always mean blast something with magic, but to use magic to deal with the problem. Now, they may not have any spells appropriate for the situation, but they should have a few that are less specifically focussed, so they may be able to come

up with a new way to use a spell of theirs innovatively to make it appropriate. I would strongly recommend giving extra experience points or some other reward for a particularly innovative or creative way to use a spell or power, definitely more than just “using a skill or power.” If you ask me, this is the type of play the G.M. should be encouraging, since the same old, same old can get boring pretty fast. The great thing is that players can usually come up with all kinds of new ideas and stunts if you give them a reason to try, continually keeping the game fresh and new.

Mages Are Convinced Magic IS Superior, Remember It!

In a nutshell I don’t think mages should be using guns or technology more than their magic; their gun should be there as something of a last resort. Sort of like, “Well, if I absolutely must fight directly...” (reluctantly pulling out gun to start shooting...). This may or may not happen with a lot of players playing spellcasters, but it should! Mages are *convinced* magic is the best thing since sliced bread and that it is generally a superior source of power. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have spent years and years of their life to master how to use this force, they’d have joined the army or done something else with their lives. Sure mages can and will use technology, but they generally *strongly prefer* to rely on magic instead wherever possible.

A comparison I might be able to use to try to demonstrate my view of this is a driver who strongly prefers a stick shift to an automatic. Sure, they can drive the automatic and they will if they need to, but give them a choice and they’ll take the standard pretty much every time. They like it better, and if you ask them about it, they’ll give all the pros and cons, that is, all the pros about standards and all the cons about automatics.

Everybody Prefers What They’re Best At

Remember what I said about the mage pretty much always preferring to use magic? This is pretty much applicable to all other characters too, so psychics prefer to use their psionics or superheroes prefer to use their super powers, etc. Generally all of the classes of a particular specialty tend to think their specialty is *King*. If you ask me, characters should get extra experience points for using their character’s specialty. Basically reward them for playing in character, or using what their character is best at. Something that might be a start or an idea for a start would be:

Combat O.C.C.s get double the normal experience points for killing monsters or defeating opponents in battle.

Magic O.C.C.s get extra experience points whenever they use spells or magic powers or abilities.

Psychic O.C.C.s get extra experience points whenever they use their psychic powers or abilities.

Scholars & Adventurer O.C.C.s get double the experience points for using skills.

That’s just a rough idea, but I think the mage should get more experience points for using magic to solve a problem, the psychic should get more experience points for using their psionics to solve a problem, and so on. Otherwise, it’s pretty boring, for

example if the mage or psychic uses technology to solve all his problems. Not to mention this is very confusing from a role-playing perspective — why is he a mage if he thinks technology is where it’s at?? Or why is a character a scholar if he hardly ever uses skills? That’s pretty broad and sweeping, but I think it gets the point across.

Mages & Psychics Can Have Great Versatility

To have a character that is more fun to play, don’t take 5 different versions of Invisibility (or pick-a-power), take different spells or powers. Likewise, you don’t really need to take certain skills if you have spells or powers which achieve the same results. So if you have Invisibility, then you don’t really need the Prowl skill, it’s kind of redundant. Take more spells that let you do different things; wouldn’t that be what you’d do if you actually were the character? In most well-balanced games, it’s the psychics and mages with a broad variety of powers that almost always have some way to be a significant help. A mage well-rounded in spells may have ones that are useful for stealth, subterfuge, movement, offense, or defense. They probably have some for finding information, and for producing other effects, such as convincing people or intimidating them. The mage who only has one type of spell has a much smaller number of scenarios where they are useful, whereas the versatile one can almost always find something useful to do.

The Key to Playing Mages & Psychics to Potential

I find almost everyone I’ve played with tends to underestimate mages and psychics, usually because they’re thinking “inside the box,” so to speak, in terms of those characters’ capabilities. If you’re playing one of those, don’t think “What one power can I use?” think “What powers can I combine or use to compliment each other?” That is the single most important piece of advice I think most players and Game Masters need. The former is too regimented a way of thinking and too deeply rooted in the “follow the rules” mentality; you want to try to think “outside the box” as much as possible. For example, take a Mind Melter with the powers Mind Bond and Mentally Possess Others. These two powers used together would probably let them get in anywhere they wanted if they could find the right people and restrain them to possess them. The Mind Melter will know every secret of the other after a Mind Bond, including security codes and all personal information, and they’ll pass any fingerprint or retina scans with no problem; about the only thing that might detect them are Dog Boys and Psi-Stalkers. A mage might use Metamorphosis to disguise himself and then compliment it with Charismatic Aura and some convincing talk, or might cast Ice to freeze the ground beneath an opponent then use Magic Net to trap them or Wind Gust to knock them over. Another possibility might be a mage using Fly as the Eagle who casts Invisibility to be an invisible flying scout, or using Blinding Flash or Cloud of Smoke in conjunction with a Time Slip to make an escape or retreat. The key is that any one of these spells used alone would not yield the desired results, or at least would be less effective.



NPC Potential - The Immortal Man

Once you start thinking like this, all it takes is a little playing with these possibilities to come up with some interesting and much more versatile mages and psychic NPCs. Let me illustrate:

The players have some encounters with a robed or cloaked human from time to time, which are always quite brief. They may even get in some battles with this individual, it pretty much depends what you want, this isn't necessary though. If they do get in some fights, these usually end with the human slipping away, or being killed or dying. The human will appear unconcerned about seemingly imminent death and may even tell the players he is immortal and cannot die. This man then dies in such a way as to be obviously dead. During initial encounters, the players may discover this human seems very afraid of fire, and will probably reason it's probably some kind of phobia from a traumatic experience. Not as likely, they may also discover that he is apparently also immune to fire.

Later, if in conflict with the players, the man will actually kill himself if he is going to be defeated or if it's obvious he cannot win, and will usually do so in such a way so that the players will not have access to his body or what's left of it afterward (he will have this planned in advance). The man will spout something about being immortal, and then kill himself in spectacular ways to prove his point. This man jumps off cliffs, leaps into and get sucked up in tornadoes and torn limb from limb, is swept away in floods or a tidal wave, buried under tons of debris of collapsing buildings, or is inside a base or factory that blows half a mountain to kingdom come when it self-destructs, etc. Likewise he may be inside an overloaded pyramid going sky high (for you epic adventure, shake-the-world types), or have his head atomized or a foot wide hole burned through his chest or some such. I would try to use each of these over an extended period of time,

such as a lengthy campaign. It's obvious most of these methods of death would inflict hundreds if not thousands of M.D., an extremely high amount to survive. The man will almost always say something like the following: "I have discovered immortality, you can never escape me! You will never see the end of me, I will keep coming back until I get you!" Laughing, he then jumps off the cliff (or other examples). Some time later, the players will eventually spot or run into the same character, and anybody who can see auras will be able to confirm that as far as they can tell, it's the same guy, or the same scent, etc. I'd advise using this man as a recurring character, (but not necessarily a central one) in an ongoing campaign for best results.

Some players may try to figure it out, trying to narrow down the possibilities; this is the type of play you want to encourage, but don't be too helpful. You're there to provide the mystery, the players are there to figure it out. The point is, the players should never be sure they know what the real deal is, until you've decided to let them know or they really have worked hard to gather details and info and have pieced it together. Mystery and curiosity can make for half the fun of playing in my opinion. You run across certain player types who are sometimes referred to as "rules lawyers" who want to make sure they always know everything that's going on in the game, even what they shouldn't have any reason to. This is just an illustration of how to beat them at their own game, making it hard or maybe impossible for them to tell, but always staying within the rules. It's just a matter of finding a way that the rules can achieve what you want, and which a lot of people won't think of. Keep the suspense and intrigue or mystery up, keep giving out small clues and eventually, if necessary, beat the players over the head with the answer. The players have to know the G.M. does not cheat, but if they already know this, it will make them that much more interested to find out what is going on.

Not a Man?

The above robed human may at first be thought to be a Burst-er, since they are immune to fire, perhaps with a phobia due to a traumatic experience. Once they're killed after taking hundreds of M.D., that will probably change to speculation he's a fire dragon metamorphed as a human. However, even fire dragons can't survive outright decapitation, which may lead some players to think extension of Alien Intelligence or deity or some such. In reality, he is none of those. The "mystery man" is in reality a Scarecrow, a Ley Line Walker/Mystic, shape-changed via Metamorphosis: Human, and using Impervious to Fire frequently, as well as Mask I.S.P. and Mask P.P.E., usually to escape or slip away (its Mystic focus is stealth and subterfuge). It makes sure not to stay in contact with the players any longer than the duration of its Metamorphosis spell, which is still several hours, and usually breaks off with plenty of time to spare. So the seemingly immortal man is easily explained in the context of the rules, though if introduced and played in the right way, it should have most players baffled. Give it a few other spells like Ice, Wind Gust, Invisibility and Charismatic Aura, and it's a pretty versatile character. No amount of normal damage will kill it, though its immunity to fire is temporary and it does still have a phobia of fire, even when immune. It makes sure not to leave the players access to its body because it's paranoid they may burn it, and it knows Dog Boys and Psi-Stalkers can't be fooled regarding faking its death up close. Give the

“man” a name and a bit of personality and I think it is unlikely the players will figure out the mystery.

To fool the players even more, the Scarecrow may also have the spell *Metamorphosis: Superior*, and may pretend to be a fire dragon, Lizard Mage or some other extremely powerful creature, if the player characters have figured out it's not human and it decides to “reveal” itself. It may say something about revealing its true form before doing so, for example. For a real laugh, after it has assumed one of those alternate guises, have a real one show up then or shortly thereafter. This can add to plots, as the player characters may mistake the real one as the one they've been running into if they don't look closely enough, and perhaps this was what the Scarecrow intended all along, to misdirect them and their attention. There should be something noticeable to distinguish between them if the players think to do it (“Looking closely, you notice this dragon has a slightly darker shade to its scales, and its wings are noticeably larger than the other one's were...”). The real deal may not be impressed with an imposter, bringing them into the storyline. Or if they show up while the Scarecrow is still there, the players see not one, but two Lizard Mages, Fire Dragons, etc.! You can get a great kick out of watching players call you a power-mad megalomaniac this way. There are many ways you can pretend like you're cheating when you are in fact, following every rule. Just be sure not to take it too far as you may frustrate players more than intrigue and interest them, and *always* make sure they somehow find out you weren't cheating.

A Scenario

An illustration of the above might be the following. “You fire half a dozen blasts at the Lizard Mage, who takes them full in the chest, then quickly casts a spell. A thick, black smoke envelops him and anyone nearby, and you hear a smooth laugh followed by a voice from the smoke, ‘You are fools if you expect such a feeble attack to affect me.’ You can hear the arrogant amusement in its tone, ‘I will deal with you in my own time for the trouble you have caused me, but I have other matters to attend to. I suggest you make your peace with whatever gods you have before next we meet.’ The laughter fades, and you can see nothing. (*Invisibility*) The supernatural presence also fades from the *Psi-stalker/Dog Boy/Mystic* senses (*Mask I.S.P./P.P.E.*)... you sense nothing now...” Note I'm being just a little liberal with my interpretation of the rules here in the interests of storytelling, and that you have to make sure you know how much leeway you have in this regard with the players before they consider you cheating. It has to be able to work both ways, but if the players can do it, so can NPCs.

Unlimited Spells — Handling This Right

Admittedly, I find G.M.s are usually very stingy, especially when it comes to rewarding or allowing mages to learn more spells. For some reason, probably leftover sentiments of playing other games, G.M.s don't want to give out higher level spells. The thing is, other games usually have specific limits on what spells a mage could learn for the exact reason of not allowing mages to become too powerful too fast. The reason was because once they got them, they were usually easily the most powerful characters in the game. In *Rifts*, the Line Walker and some other

mages have no limits on the spells they can learn, thus giving the impression to the G.M.s used to other games that the Line Walker can quickly become the most powerful character in the game if not kept in check.

This is fundamentally incorrect, because in the other games the powerful wizard with lots of high level spells is a powerhouse among fairly strong to weak characters. By contrast, in *Rifts*, the Line Walker who starts learning lots of mid to high level spells is usually at best a powerhouse among many powerhouses. With the possible exceptions of *Carpet of Adhesion* and maybe *Invulnerability*, I don't think too many spells can really be used to achieve the “munchkin” effect, and even *Invulnerability* has a fairly limited duration.





Don't Take Away the Line Walker's Main Advantage

I believe the ability to learn any spell at any time can be one of the fundamental reasons for taking the character, and it's also their only real equalizer, so don't take it away. This includes taking it away indirectly through play in-game by not giving the character the opportunity to learn or gain spells. I mean, just take a look at the spells. Most tech characters start with equipment that rivals the fairly high level ones (say 7-9 or so), which most G.M.s don't like to give mages until they've gained at least 4-6 levels. This seems pretty weird when you consider they usually don't really have a problem with giving the tech characters tons of super powerful equipment at 1st level (basically a G.M. bias in my opinion). The other thing to consider is that most of these more powerful spells will use a lot of a mage's P.P.E., maybe almost all of it, to cast just *one* spell. That's a pretty serious weakness and limitation on the mage if you ask me, enough to compensate for the power, provided you make mages work and earn it in the first place.

Why Don't Line Walkers Have Spell Restrictions?

The great thing about the Line Walkers' ability to learn any spell at any time is that it gives the G.M. total control over their power levels, and that of other mages who can also do this. It can be kept low, or moved as high as desired. This makes the Line Walker the ideal character to add to any group of any power level already in play, because they can be anywhere on the power scale according to what the G.M. wants and the spells they give them. This one ability of the Line Walker being able to learn any spell at any time is the only thing that can enable the old O.C.C. to keep pace with most of the new ones, which is still dependent on the G.M. allowing the player to learn spells to put him on a comparable level. However, from other games there's a leftover sentiment that a mage has to pay his dues before getting any good, useful or worthwhile spells and that each

one should probably bust his bank account when he acquires them. I just think if the G.M. isn't going to make anyone else pay their dues, they should ease up on the mages quite a bit too. Don't give them spells free or anything, but do the power armor pilots need to do anything to pay their dues before they get their power armor or robot? Generally, no, not a thing. What about the Borgs, do they need to start with a crappy body and work their way up to a better one? Generally, nope, they can get the best at 1st level. This problem is discussed further on. So why should the mages be forced to work like a slave for a mediocre, but not that great, spell? If you ask me they shouldn't have to, just work reasonably hard.

Most High Level Spells Aren't Unbalancingly Powerful

I'm not saying you should just start mages out with a bunch of powerful spells, but I think they should be easier to acquire than most G.M.s allow for, or the books seem to indicate. This is especially true considering their power level is usually nothing that will really affect game balance in a major way, for the bulk of spells. If you want to have the players of progressive characters like Line Walkers actually feeling like they can improve and increase their character's power to eventually rival and maybe even surpass other characters (generally technological characters that start off with a high power level but don't really change much after going up levels), then you have to let them see you will let them gain spells to this effect.

So to summarize, I think the right way to G.M. and handle a Line Walker character who can learn any spell he wants at any time is *not* to restrict him to spell levels 1-2 more or less indefinitely, or for an excessively long time. Or for a Mind Melter who gains one or two super psionics each level to be forced to crawl through the lower levels at a snail's pace. Note I have a much shorter time in mind when I say "excessively long time" than most Game Masters. I think a character should take around three or four sessions to gain a level for levels 1-3 if played well, slowing down a little at level 4. This especially applies if the group is about four players and they get the chance to be played well, and are not fighting to be noticed in a group of a dozen or so. Keep in mind I believe I prefer a group to be a little higher level than most probably do, so use whatever works best for you.

Progressive Characters

Progression!

One of the potentially big problems with Rifts, in my opinion, is that a large number of the characters do not really progressively advance in abilities, or do so far too slowly when a game is run by a typical Rifts G.M. This is alright for the ones that aren't really designed with the intention of gaining abilities, but for the ones that are, it can be a problem. The key to knowing how to properly G.M. Line Walkers, and other practitioners of magic who have no limits on the spells they can learn, is progression. This also goes for other characters who have a very noticeable increase in abilities as their level increases, such as Mind Melters and other psychics. The mage or other progressive

character is generally (but not always) going to start at first level as a weak and wimpy schmoie, which is fine; that's exactly what they're supposed to be at that point. The problem is most G.M.s seem to neglect and leave these characters there at that level for an extremely long time, if not forever. Or the G.M. intentionally keeps players there, and no one ever really advances much, because for such a large proportion of characters, advancement just really doesn't make much difference or matter.



Use Character Progression to Role-Play

Building character is a lot more interesting for me with progressive characters like mages and Mind Melters than with static ones that basically don't change much. Progressive ones have to deal with issues of how to use and control their increasing or new power, and as it continues to increase this becomes more and more important, and more and more of a problem. They generally also have to figure this out for themselves. Playing them figuring this out over time is a great chance to further develop the character. They might get all kinds of new people bothering them that they didn't have to deal with before, when they were a lowly weak character. People might suddenly start appearing who want the character's help, or to prove themselves better, etc. The mage who gains seriously powerful spells may suddenly have a lot more to think about when he destroys a building full of innocent people through misuse of his new power, accidental or not. The Mind Melter who gains the power of Mind Bond and carelessly uses it with the wrong person may acquire permanent insanities to deal with. Potentially good role-playing scenarios come right out of power gained through advancement many times.

Low Experience Points Is Very Limiting For Progressives

Keeping progressive characters at low levels indefinitely is somewhat equivalent to telling a player of a more systematic game who wants to play a mage he'll never get past 3rd or 4th level. Or, in essence, they'll never really make much difference or advance their character to a noticeably higher power level, or maybe even be able to do anything that really matters. In a nut-

shell, they'll usually take a back seat to the others in terms of any action. How much would you want to play a mage if this were the case? Many players, including me, would find this very discouraging to playing a mage, as we expect a tradeoff or gain later on. If we play a character who is weak at first, we expect to be more powerful later.

When they are stuck at low levels indefinitely with progressive characters, players are really limited by the G.M., more so than they probably should be in most cases. I believe having a character based on progression who doesn't progress due to the G.M. severely reduces the options available to that character. The major advantage of the Line Walker, for example, is that they can learn any spell any time. So if the G.M. basically takes that away by either not making spells available or not giving the Line Walker the chance to learn, they've unnecessarily limited that character.

Increase Options, Don't Restrict

The progressive character is supposed to be advancing, with new options and possibilities opening up to them as they do so. You want players to have *more* options to deal with situations, not fewer. For example, as G.M. you'll be planning for the players to deal with problem X, but not usually how (or if so, probably only very generally). I find it's more fun and interesting the more ways the players have of dealing with situations, because they try an even broader variety of things when they have more options, making it more interesting for you. The more spells, powers, psionics, etc., they have, the more ways they have to deal with situations. Please note, by that I do not mean "I blast it with Fire Bolt" vs "I blast it with Sub-Particle Acceleration." I mean using Mask of Deceit to acquire information, when the mage didn't have any appropriate spells to help acquire it before, so they would've been forced to act without that information previously. Or maybe the mage doesn't have that spell so he has to try and use Shadow Meld to sneak in close enough to eavesdrop on someone, or if the spellcaster only has Words of Truth, then they'll have to find the right person and use that spell on them. The point is, players should have a lot of different spells so that they can try to find one in their repertoire for just about any situation. Some spells may be easy to apply directly, but many times the mage may only have one that can be made to work, but will require a little more footwork. You want players to generally be thinking like the latter, using creative ways and thinking to get around any limitations of their spell or power arsenal. However, if the mage's spell library consists only of Chameleon, Invisibility, Invisibility: Superior and Shadow Meld, then their options are much more restricted than if they had a good variety and mix.

Progressive Characters Are Meant to Advance

It is much more important for characters whose abilities progress to advance at a reasonable pace than ones that are relatively static. Since so many characters in Rifts aren't that progressive in terms of noticeably "better" characters as they advance in level, the G.M. has a special duty to the players who want to play these characters not to unnecessarily give them the short end of the stick. Mages aren't intended to stay at 1st level forever, nor are the Mind Melter and many others expected to

stay down there either. Many players like playing characters who start small and do become noticeably better by advancing in level. This is the “squire to knight” effect, where the player starts a humble squire and eventually progresses to become a mighty knight. This generally doesn’t include most of the combat O.C.C.s as they don’t really change that much by increasing in levels. However, some characters like mages are meant to be advancing at a reasonable pace (if not fairly quickly) and not spending interminable periods of time stuck at the low levels with only a handful of low level spells.

So the idea is to start your mages and other progressives as schmoe just like normal, but to let them advance noticeably in power by gaining spells at a reasonable rate (usually levels too). Advancement is supposed to be their one big advantage over everyone else, and nowadays it’s one of the only advantages the Line Walker really has. That should be emphasized, because it seems quite apparent this was intended by Kevin Siembieda to eventually be a definite advantage of the character over others. In other words, when everyone else topped out quickly, the progressives could keep gaining power and eventually probably surpass many of the others.

This is my personal opinion, but I think it’s most fun for a gaming group to have characters around levels 3-8 (keeping in mind I prefer progressive characters). Players with progressive characters they’ve worked up to that level will have built up their characters the way they wanted. They’ll also be more attached to their characters since there will be a much more definite sense of “I worked at my character, and he or she got benefits from it. Starting over means throwing that work and those benefits away.” This is generally referring to levels which in turn mean powers, spells and skills in Rifts. Low level characters just aren’t as much fun if you’re playing a progressive character, since you can’t do as much and your options are therefore more restricted. So I think not as much time should be spent playing at lower levels.

As another illustration of my personal opinion on this, I think a Line Walker should have at least 2-3 spells from level 5+ before they reach 4th level. I’m more inclined to say 1-4 spells from level 5-6 and 1 or 2 from level 7-8 by level 4, and keeping in mind this is either what I’d consider about right, or a little low, and maybe give out a few more spells, but only a few. So instead of restricting the mage from learning any worthwhile spells, the G.M. should allow the mage to gain spells on a fairly consistent basis, especially when you keep in mind that a lot of the spells that are higher level will only really be sufficient to put mages on par with technology, not suddenly catapult them into a power-monger stratosphere. Just keep an eye on the mage in the party, and if you’re worried they’re becoming too powerful, slow down giving out the spells. I haven’t seen this happen much in my experience though. It’s generally almost always the opposite, given I’m talking mainly about the Line Walker, and not the high-powered guys like Temporal Wizards who seem like they could get out of control pretty easily.

Playing Characters’ In-Game Growth Adds to the Game

The reason I think like this might be because I personally prefer to play progressive characters the bulk of the time. I think there’s something to be said for taking a weakling and building

them up into a character to be reckoned with, over the course of playing in game sessions, as opposed to having a powerful character because you just whipped them up. The former should have tons more personality and character because you can relate many stories about their exploits as opposed to having to just make up stories about the other’s exploits. Trust me, the ones that really happened are usually much more entertaining, and a lot easier to remember if you actually played them. These players also had to experience the difficulty of working themselves up in power level, so that there is a real sense of achievement for the players in making it to that point.

Progression Must Be Played to Be Appreciated

This is pretty much a given. A five year TV story spanning 86 episodes, all one big plot line, has to be seen in its entirety to be fully appreciated. If you only watch the last 4 episodes, it just doesn’t have the same effect. It can’t. You haven’t seen the characters suffer and struggle for years, finally, in the big climax pulling it all off as everything comes together (with a big sense of satisfaction and closure, hopefully). The same applies to characters; ones that you’ve run through dozens of adventures will probably hold more attachment and flavor than ones you made up five minutes ago but who are just as powerful. The former have tons more depth and background, and the only thing I can say is playing it out is far superior to just instantly boosting a character several levels.



Satisfaction — Stayin’ Alive

In addition to that, there’s the satisfaction you get from having kept a weak character alive long enough to become reasonably powerful in a Rifts game, something which is usually a feat in itself (but I like to think an entertaining one). To do this you generally have to play reasonably smart and not take foolish chances or risks, such as openly provoking a dragon that wasn’t doing anything wrong or hostile against the player characters, just to see if you can beat it. If you’re playing a progressive character and you do keep them alive long enough, and play well, they shouldn’t stay weak for too lengthy a time. This is why the G.M. has to try to keep things advancing at a reasonable pace.

The G.M. must also keep in mind that although most players will have more fun with a 4th or 6th level character, unless you’re dealing with some exceptionally good role-players, you can’t just start them at 4th or 6th level and expect it to be the same as if they had to work to get their characters up there. The reason many other games have a very concrete and measurable advancement system is so the players can establish and get a definite feel for their characters’ capabilities and limitations very quickly. It also helps the G.M., since everyone is generally on a very similar power scale, being weak when they start and

becoming more powerful as they advance. Ideally the players will learn to play a more careful and cautious game when they realize they really are very weak and that it doesn't take much to instantly kill their character, dead. Likewise low level characters in most other RPGs quickly learn to fear wizards of any noticeable power level, such as being able to throw fireballs or lightning around, because these things can kill low level characters pretty darn easily. Like martial arts, other games try to emphasize that the characters should have to learn discipline before they can advance to truly significant power levels. In general, power level of the character usually tends to (or seems intended to) correspond with the maturity of the player in most RPGs, which comes through experience, and generally there is no substitute for experience.

Mature Role-Players Can Be Hard to Find

One of the difficulties in playing a lot of Palladium's games such as Rifts, is that in many cases it puts in the hands of the starting player a character who is dramatically powerful right from the get go. A lot of the time, this would be like starting a character in another game at level 7 or 8, or possibly even higher. Now add to that the problem that many times the player will probably not really have a feel or respect for their character's power level and/or the maturity to focus on the role-playing aspect of their character. The temptation is just too sweet for a lot of players to start using their character's power freely, and the power is already in their hands, never mind having to convince the G.M. to provide it. Power can quickly go to the heads of many starting players, and it seems to me a lot tend to do a lot less thinking and role-playing in favor of being powerful and abusing their characters' strength.

The Destination Doesn't Matter, It's the Route Taken

I still think it's important for a character to have started out weak and become stronger through actual play, even if they did get stronger fairly fast. So I mostly disagree with starting a progressive character at a fairly high level, like level 4 or 5+, especially if you know you're going to be playing on a regular basis in an extended campaign and the players would have the chance to earn the levels themselves through play. This can make all the difference, as the players have to actually work through a phase of being weak.

Using Progression to Improve the Game

Anticipation Can Add Interest

If I play a Line Walker, I'll be trying to get him to as high a level as I can, so that he's more powerful and capable of handling more, and I don't want to wait forever for him to get there. However, I do still think it's important to have to work to get to that point, and the reason is the title of this paragraph. Just remember when you were a kid and Christmas came along. I don't know about you, but for me the excitement about the antici-

tion of Christmas and what I'd be getting was almost always just as high or higher as when I actually got the presents. Same deal here, I think it's important for players to be excitedly anticipating what their character will be getting instead of just instantly getting it, I think it makes the game better and more fun for everyone. The key is, like the first part of this article, the player has to be actually anticipating getting something worthwhile and not resigned to getting nothing, or advancing so slowly it makes little difference or has little effect. Anticipation can be key to motivation.

Specific Rewards Make the Plot or Villain Clearer

It seems a lot of the time players don't pay really close attention to the game and sometimes don't even really know what's going on. I was surprised when this happened to me, but when you don't have a clear picture what's going on and who's who, you might just end up wondering what the G.M. wanted the group to do or had in mind. By keeping things really simple and steering the party towards acquiring a particular spell (or weapon, or something similar) you may be able to help keep villains and plot lines clearer and easier to remember. The players then only need to remember they are looking for a Fire spell to easily recall they are preparing to face a villain of cold or ice. Or x spell for y villain, whatever, as long as the spell relates directly to the villain/plot/etc.

Look to Video Games & Anime for Ideas

The way I would do this can be best illustrated by video game RPGs or a frequent theme in movies and anime (but more so anime). In video game RPGs, you frequently run into or will have to go against super tough opponents who cannot be beaten at your characters' current power level. So what do you do? Well, you go find someone who knows their weakness, or has a special weapon or technique that can defeat them. So you go adventure some more, and maybe do something for this NPC either as a favor or to prove yourself, and they reward you with the Sword of Light that can destroy the Shadow Monster, or the spell Blazing Fire which can melt the Freeze Wizard's Ice Barrier shield, etc.

Anime has the same frequently happening, where the character starts weak and eventually needs to learn a technique to beat a certain foe, which they do. As they keep learning techniques to beat foe after foe, they eventually become strong and powerful because of the many techniques they've learned. Remember that the enemy many times may also be well aware of the characters' striving to get this thing to defeat them, and may have taken steps to counter it. Another thing to keep in mind is that having this one thing should in no way ensure victory for the players, but should give them a much better chance. In anime the character may learn the mechanics of a technique, but does not really understand it or know how to truly use it, so when they try it on the villain, it may not affect them or has only minor effect, much less than the character was anticipating. This can be great to throw players for a bit of a loop, "Just because you have the sword doesn't mean you can use it well enough to beat me! You're too unskilled, it doesn't matter if you do have it, I'll still



beat you easily!" Villains in anime are usually arrogant enough to actually tell the character this, "You can't beat me like that! Your weak attacks and skills are nothing to me!" Whereupon the character usually has some revelation or somehow realizes or learns how to truly use their technique, suddenly making it much more useful, or having much more of the effect desired. In the game, the players may have an adventure or two to "show them the light," where upon finishing them, they suddenly understand how to unleash the full power of the sword or some such. This is great for further role-playing too, maybe a sentient rune weapon who communicates with the player(s), "You say you need my power to defeat a monster, yet you are no different from the one you seek to defeat. Search your heart. Why is it you desire power? What is the true strength of a weapon? Only when you understand the answers to these questions will I lend you my power."

The method of learning spells for a particular purpose is probably the way I would do it with Line Walkers, allowing them to learn certain spells because they are needed, and eventually they'd become more powerful through doing so on a repeated basis. After the initial purpose is done, or enemy beaten, the Line Walker still has the spell at their disposal, and it's up to them to remember to use it in new situations or in new ways. Doing it this way also makes gaining spells a little more interesting, since it relates directly to the happenings in the game.

So one of the best ways to acquire spells in a game I run might be to be seeking to defeat some villain or monster where the mage will be given help by someone else who wants them defeated, destroyed, killed, driven off, etc. The mage would be given help, usually after proving himself somehow (a small adventure or test), in the form of a specific spell which will be of particular use against this opponent. So for a monster vulnerable against fire, they might be taught Fire Bolt, against an NPC whose organization they need to infiltrate, it might be Mask of

Deceit or Invisibility, against someone with Techno-Wizard armor with the power of Invulnerability they might be taught Dispel Magic Barriers, etc.

This Can Help Plots

If they do a good job, the person who taught them the spell might have more uses for them. You could use this to develop, further embellish or enrich plots. The player characters might become involved with an organization which they're doing jobs for in return for rewards, including spells. But there might be more to this organization than meets the eye. Or maybe they have a mentor or person they report to who is giving them these jobs to prepare them for something to come. They give the player characters a few jobs they don't think the characters can do, and they manage to pull it off, so this individual now thinks, "If they can pull that off, then maybe they could do it, they might be the ones I need, I didn't think they'd ever have a chance, but I didn't think they could do the last task..." Maybe it's on a bigger scale, the CS is coming and they need someone to lead the way or make a stand and show it can be done, even if on a small scale.

Adds Character & Personality to the Game

Giving spells out this way is also beneficial to the player character and the game in general, the player character gets spells they know will be of particular use and help against this specific opponent or problem, and thus get to be of a definite help and an edge for the group in the game. So these players already know they won't be useless for the whole game (don't laugh — it happens). It also helps add to background of the mage because then they can relate a lot of their spells to a particular adventure, purpose or opponent they used it for. It makes their characters and their exploits more memorable.

Gaining a Master or Tutor - Ideas

Note this doesn't mean they will just be given the spell they want or need, but they will likely get it if the NPC who has it is convinced of the character's motivations or if they think they can use the character. Of course, remember that many masters flat out refuse when asked, and are only convinced if the characters continue to bother and harass them for lengthy periods of time. So it doesn't always have to be "Sure, no problem," or "Yes." It can be much more interesting than those old standbys, "No," or "I refuse," or "I will not teach it to someone who does not yet understand how and when to use the power they have," or "You have power, yes, but having power and having total control and mastery of that power are two very different things." Leave it to the players to convince them, and make them work for it, just don't make it impossible. This generally means make them try their hardest, then right when they're convinced it was all a waste of time and they're about to give up, let them have it. Enjoy their frustration all the while, but don't push them too far.



Experience Points

Stinginess Can Be Bad

The same thing that goes for spells in my previous essay also goes for experience points. Don't be too stingy with them, because it's a turnoff for a lot of players to be actively playing in the game and not being rewarded for it, even if the players don't specifically say so. Mind you, I don't think if you're stingy with experience points everyone's going to suddenly stop doing things or just sit there and mull, it just might be that they're not as enthusiastic as they could be, or maybe they could be having more fun if you just gave them a little more incentive. I find the game is most interesting and fun when all the players are eagerly and enthusiastically playing their best, trying to think of fun, funny, and innovative things their characters can do to add to the enjoyment of the game. If it takes awarding experience points to do this or doing so will help them along, I say throw them in. When you're not rewarding players for playing well and helping everyone have a good time and a fun game session, you're just depriving them of a tangible reward that is easily given, even if it may be unnecessary with some players. Sort of like the way some people don't like to take the time to say, "thanks for your help, I appreciate it," after someone helps them with something, even though it takes all of three seconds and might be much appreciated.

Handling Experience Points

Experience points are one of the few tangible rewards the players can look at to measure their progress, so in a way, by not giving out enough experience points, you'll be telling the players their characters are making little or no progress. A stingy G.M. can be just as bad as one who gives everything to the players for nothing. Neither extreme is good. Instead, the G.M. must strive for a balance. Some people may like spending two years of real time to build a character up to 2nd or 3rd level; myself, by that time I want to be at least 5th or 6th level. I know some players are more goal-oriented than others, and I'll admit I'm definitely one of those, but I tend to think most players would prefer to advance in abilities progressively and that it's a good idea to reward players for trying and playing rather than to force them to be 1st level forever. Experience Points are like a scoreboard of sorts, if the plot and story are very interesting, this may not matter much, but it usually doesn't hurt, and adds to the fun in my opinion. Remember too that experience points can be accumulated for multiple awards through only a few actions. A player character may see a damsel in distress, foolishly charge the bad guys and defeat them. Now they may get experience for playing in character, endangering their character to help others, using skills or powers, and defeating a menace, all from that one act. If you look at it this way, experience is not nearly as hard to acquire, and can accumulate quite quickly.

Avoid Procrastination & Keep Score

Don't fall into the trap of thinking like "I'll get around to it later," or "It's not really a major concern or that big a deal." Experience points could be one of the big motivators for a player, since experience points tend to reward specific play with a specific reward. Players playing progressive characters will probably be ones to be a little more motivated by experience points,

since they'll be gaining more benefits from advancement. Putting off rewarding, or neglecting to sufficiently reward players for good play may be a turnoff for playing well, or at least will not encourage it. You want players with progressive characters to see they're making good and relatively speedy progress at the lower levels, so they can already be looking forward to reaching the mid levels with excited anticipation. It makes a big difference if the players see this as a goal they will achieve shortly with a little more effort, rather than an unachievable goal.

Just another note from me on the awarding of experience points — keep track. Write it down immediately, because if you don't, totals and awards get put off and lost in the shuffle. Then when you want to award them, you can't remember who got what or how much. I've both seen and done this one many times, so if you're awarding experience points frequently, keep track. It's like spending money, when you write down every bit you spend, you see pretty quick where it goes, but if you don't, you just keep spending it and it seems to just disappear.

Encourage Effort

Particularly if someone comes up with a really good idea and doesn't get rewarded for it, they might not feel that the G.M. is giving rewards for effort, and not put in as much effort. This is generally not a good thing. So the idea is to do your best as a G.M. to make sure that player effort is rewarded.

The G.M. Controls the Pace

If the players are playing the way you want, cooperating, thinking, planning, and using logic/reasoning/powers/skills/etc., then I think you should be rewarding them, not being stingy. Also, if it takes two years to get to 2nd or 3rd level, you might as well admit the players are never going to make 6th or higher, or probably even 5th. It's really all up to the G.M. how fast the players advance. The G.M. should also remember to consider the players' perspective. If you're a G.M., ask yourself if you'd like playing a character who would be 1st level forever no matter how hard you tried to advance. Wouldn't you rather play a character you knew you could get from 1st to 5th level by making an effort to play? I'd say odds are if given a choice most will prefer to advance.

A Tool of the G.M.

I always considered experience points a way for the G.M. to communicate to the players the kind of game they are running, by the kind of play they intend to reward. If the G.M. gives lots of experience points for killing monsters, players will probably tend to focus on killing monsters. If they reward lots of experience points for solving puzzles, players will probably put a lot more effort into solving puzzles, and so on.

By using experience points to communicate their desires to the players, the G.M. has another tool they can use to broadly steer the direction the game is going in. If the G.M. wants a goofy, humorous adventure, they give lots of experience points for a good laugh (more than for anything else the player characters can do for experience points - or much easier to get than those others); if they want a thinking game, then they give experience points for players using reasoning and figuring things out. The point is, the G.M. can try and determine what type of game is most fun for them and their players, and then use experience points as a tool to try to steer the game in that direction.

Role-Playing Strategically

Start Thinking

One of the most often ignored or severely underused ways to add to the interest in a game, is to start thinking about what actual combat would be like in the game setting. Depending upon your angle you may want to keep it direct and simple, however, you can add a lot of detail to your game by running combat a little different than you may be used to. First think of real life battle — take a squad of American grunts in World War II or Vietnam and picture them marching along across the countryside or through the jungle or forest. A shot rings out, shattering the peaceful setting. The first thing that happens is everyone still standing instantly hits the ground to take cover from further attacks. How many times does this happen in an RPG? I'd wager not often enough in most games.

In real life a platoon does not tend to be completely eliminated in a single battle, to my limited knowledge. One side or the other usually retreats or pulls back with plenty of time to spare before they think they're going to lose all their men or forces (depending on the target and objective, but let's assume they're just on a random patrol). If they're attacked by surprise it could happen that they are all eliminated, but generally in an engagement, you have time to respond in some way, and there are usually survivors no matter how well executed the attack. Nor does everyone usually die when the first shots are fired, though depending on the circumstances, a squad or platoon may take heavy losses in the first few seconds or minutes.

Mages Are Supposed to Be Strategic Thinkers

Mages with powerful spells generally don't go destroying things arbitrarily, and there is a good reason for this. Consider the important fact that throwing powerful spells tends to attract a lot of attention to mages and makes them a much more noticeable and important threat to the enemy. This makes them much more of a priority target to eliminate or incapacitate, if necessary, by a combined attack or efforts. It would be like waving a neon flag, or bright red against a dull background; you might as hold up a sign saying "Attack ME! Attack ME!" Also, mages do have to sleep sometime, and, except for a handful of very powerful ones, generally don't have the power to put barriers up around themselves every night, so all it would take is one upset peasant or farmer with a rock to kill "the man in league with demonic forces" while asleep. Mages are generally smart enough not to draw unnecessary attention to themselves.

Powerful People Are Scary

People tend to fear power, and mages and psychics know that most of the time it's better to keep just how powerful you are to yourself, and not unnecessarily cause fear in others. Rifts mages in particular are quite painfully cognizant of this fact, after what happened to the Great Dunscon when he brazenly and foolishly tried to throw his weight around against the Coalition States. Lots of people tend to lash out at that which they fear, and mages got a very bloody reminder of that in the Campaign of Blood. Powerful mages and psychics also know that a little intimidation can go a long way towards keeping people out of their hair, and that fear can be used to keep these people at bay,



paralyzing them into inaction instead of throwing them into a frenzy (i.e., they can pull a good bluff). However, they're walking a very thin line, and they pretty much all know it. In addition, it never hurts to have a few surprises up your sleeve just in case. If people are not quite sure of the extent of a mage's power, odds are most would rather be safe than sorry and will leave them alone.

Powerful People Have Things to Consider

Let's take a mage with some powerful spells for example. In general, for the G.M., mages having fairly powerful spells shouldn't be a problem if the player is a thinker. For me, this means even though the mage has powerful spells, such as Sub-Particle Acceleration (especially powerful on a ley line or nexus) or any number of other powerful spells, the mage who stops and thinks may be reluctant to use them. This could be for a number of reasons, such as:

1. The spell may use up a lot of P.P.E. and the mage isn't sure they want to expend that much energy at the moment.
2. It could be that the spell is a complete waste of P.P.E. because if it misses or the target makes their saving throw, the spell has no effect.
3. It takes too many melee actions to cast the spell, time which might be better spent doing something else or casting a weaker spell, especially given 1 and 2.
4. Most importantly, considering this from a role-playing context, using the powerful spell may draw extra attention to the mage that they don't want. This may cause them to become the prime target or threat to the enemy, whose attention and efforts are suddenly turned to and focused on the mage.

Thinking Strategically in Combat

This should generally be applied across the board and not just to mages. So the power-monger or powerful character in the group who obviously outclasses all the other player characters in battle will be easily identified as the primary or most dangerous target. The power-monger may like it until all eight of their opponents start combining their firepower on them and ignoring the “weaker” characters (or those that seem weaker). Some of this was pretty much said by Kevin Siembieda way back in **Rifts Conversion Book 1** in the part about the disadvantages of playing the Glitter Boy. However, I feel I now have a much better understanding of how the ideas would function in actual play. I felt the examples there were a little lacking in detail and couldn’t really think of any good way to run such a scenario if I were to G.M. one, until just recently.

Secrets Can Make the Difference — Knowledge Is Power

Remember that surprises and keeping certain things hidden until it’s absolutely necessary to use them can totally change a scenario. Let’s say, for example, the player characters have been chasing an enemy mage for some time, but only skirmished with him briefly once or twice. Then, when they corner him and enter into battle, the mage metamorphosizes into his true form of an adult dragon in the second melee. The whole battle and scenario is suddenly completely changed. This is great for possible plot twists — maybe the dragon was trying to lure the players into doing something but didn’t want to reveal itself, but now it has slipped up and is revealing its true form to try to get what it wants.

Allow both player characters and NPCs to benefit from keeping surprises in reserve from others so that their opponents are surprised when they reveal their surprise, secret or reserve. This is rather like anime, where many characters will be battling when one suddenly says something like, “I have let this go on long enough, now witness my true power!” Of course, then the other guy usually pulls a similar line, and then everyone’s back to square one, not really sure of the power of the coming attack. Melodrama aside, this makes for more interesting gaming in my opinion.

Remember though, that villains and player characters can always put on a show of bravado, being hurt a lot by an attack but trying not to let it show. “His arms crossed defensively in front of him, he stands through your fire blast attack. After it finishes, smoke tendrils waft from him, as he straightens from his defensive posture and says, ‘Not bad, you’ve improved since last we met.’” Even though he’s in reality barely standing after weathering the attack, this should intimidate the player characters. Or the player characters might be hurt a lot by an attack, but manage to hide it, surprising the villain enough to make him retreat. This can make for a few more interesting possibilities, such as this attracting the attention of a more powerful villain who decides to test them, and discovers they aren’t as powerful as they thought, or not at their level despite the earlier display. “Now I see, you barely withstood their attack earlier. You should better learn your limits, push them too hard and you’ll only get yourself killed more quickly. You’re of no interest to me with your present abilities.” Just as another note for anime, villains usually tend to express surprise when the character lands the finishing

blow or the one that defeats them, “No way! He can’t have that kind of power!” or “I can’t be beaten like this! (or: by you!)” Generally if you want to use this, the place would be when the player characters pull their surprise or unveil their secret they’ve been saving, it’ll give them even more of a sense of satisfaction. Of course, you can do this the other way from time to time as well, as the players may end up getting their tails kicked by an adult dragon or some such, right when they think they’ve beaten the mage, who was faking. Be sure to remember it can work both ways.

Play the Scope of Large Organizations Properly

Play enemies intelligently, especially large organizations and groups of professionals. This means organized enemies with large numbers will almost definitely send scouting parties to discover or gain a feeling for the capabilities of a hostile force. They will then use this knowledge as best they can to prepare a method of neutralizing the hostile force, if it comes to that. Large organizations and forces with large numbers will use their resources to their advantage whenever possible. Keep in mind the enemy will be prepared and better organized to deal with the same group they scouted in a previous battle if they end up fighting again. They may square up against one player character, or particular members may head straight for a specific player character they are well suited to neutralize. So the Psi-Stalker in the group will head straight for their target, the Mind Melter in the other group. Maybe a sniper makes his priority a turret gunner of an Abolisher. The key is to remember they are trying to take full advantage of their strengths and the other’s weaknesses.

Think Like a General

Think of this like a general commanding an army. You don’t just march every one of your troops onto the field and have everyone on both sides shoot until everybody’s dead on one side. You have tons of smaller groups your army is broken down into, and you definitely send in several squads to scout out territory and assess the situation before you risk the bulk of your troops. Based on those squads’ assessment, you then prepare a force and a plan best suited to deal with the enemy your squads discovered. The enemy will be doing likewise, trying to scout out your army and then prepare a force and a plan that will deal with it. Anything unexpected generally makes it harder for the force assembled to deal with the original problem, because they probably aren’t prepared for it. Information is of critical importance, and the side that can get the best information and keep their own plans secret from the other side at the very least has a huge advantage. If push comes to shove, it’s preferable to have a few aces up your sleeve in case things don’t go as well as you thought. For example, keeping one of your best units in reserve and not using them at all, keeping their presence, concealed in the brush, a secret from the enemy. Then if you do need to use them, you can cause a major change in the way things are going on the battlefield. Keep in mind the enemy will also be trying to hide a few aces of their own from you.

Dealing With This as G.M.

The G.M. has to deal with this by trying to allow the players the opportunity to have the element of surprise over NPCs. This

may seem tough to do, because the players will reason they should theoretically be able to pull the same stunt on villain after villain without a hitch. Of course, as a G.M. who doesn't want the players always doing the same thing, you let the players get away with it a couple of times and then use it against them. Some enemy will have heard of them somehow or observed them pull their trick last time and is prepared for it, with a few surprises of their own. This turns the tables on the players, who should probably be captured, surrender or retreat if the enemy has adequately prepared. Hey, this is what happens in real life.

Individuals Seek Info, Too

Even individuals will many times enter into combat for the sole purpose of feeling out the other's capabilities and power, and simply withdraw or retreat once they have accomplished this. How many times have you seen this in movies, anime, comic books and novels? They may well be capable of defeating the player characters, but retreat anyway, by choice or not. The decision may be taken out of their hands, or they may voluntarily let the player characters go willingly. Think of comics and movies where the hero is saved at the last minute by luck, the bad guy has other things to attend to, or maybe they don't think the hero's enough of a threat to bother. For the vast majority of villains, their priority is not the hero, the hero is just in the way of their goal.

Players Shouldn't Always Want to Engage

Something I think most G.M.s should do fairly early in an adventure or campaign, but not first thing, is to put the player characters in a battle which they pretty much absolutely cannot win through sheer force. Something such as the player characters being badly outnumbered or outgunned, or both, where a frontal assault, if unsuccessful, should not get any player characters killed (maybe hurting them a lot though). This is ideal for parties without power armor or robots, or powerful supernatural characters like dragons, and who may erroneously decide they're invincible. It can be done without really causing any noticeable damage to the player characters (that is, if they're smart and avoid direct combat), except maybe to shake or wake them up a bit. The ideal way for this to happen is for the player characters to realize they are severely out-powered right away without taking any real damage if they play half-smart. Then they have to figure out what to do. Just because direct attack won't work doesn't mean they can't deal with the enemy with a good plan, though it might make a lot more sense to lie low and retreat at first opportunity. How many soldiers in a squad of grunts that run into an enemy tank would decide to pointlessly charge it? Soldiers are well aware they might die in battle, but they're generally not eager to rush it along unnecessarily. It doesn't help their side or their cause to get recklessly killed, so the soldiers would lie low to wait for a chance with better prospects if possible.



Possible examples might include:

1. Player characters trying to disable, destroy, or more likely, delay or distract a CS tank, but with lots of cover for the running and hiding player characters, so the tank probably won't hit if they're careful to use cover.

2. Player characters run afoul of a CS platoon, and are outnumbered something like 3-5+ to 1. Again, with lots of cover, the careful player characters should be able to slip away or lay low and not get shot a dozen of times or more, just have hails of blasts firing around them and maybe a few near-misses.

When Frontal Assault Is Suicidal

Basically, there are scenarios where the players can try a frontal assault, but they should figure out very quick it's not going to be all that effective. Ideally, they realize they have to come up with some other solution, even if it's only to delay the enemy in order to slip away and beat an effective retreat (which may very well be all they can come up with). I would say this scenario should not be one where the players are convinced they must defeat the opposition, but rather run across them (and the enemy doesn't listen to reason, opening fire immediately), so the player characters hopefully feel they have no reason to waste energy fighting the opponent and they can just slip away.

Squad of Grunts vs Tank

This is particularly obvious with the example of a squad of grunts (effectively CS Grunts) from Free Quebec on patrol who run across a CS tank in the field. The squad has no serious firepower to take out the tank with, and could very well be completely eliminated if they try simply exchanging shots with the tank. Instead the grunts would probably be trying to avoid the tank as much as possible and escape, only firing to distract the crew inside or set up some kind of tactic to try and disable it (like putting a mine or explosives on one tread or thruster while its crew's attention is drawn by the grunts shooting at the tank). They'll report in to superiors once they're clear of the tank or at first opportunity, as it could be important that they spotted the tank where it was. For example, "The enemy must have taken X, we lost contact 12 hours ago."

Reward All Strategic Play

Here's something that might be a new concept to you as a G.M.: Award experience points to the players when they retreat, if it was a good idea given their current situation (or their assessment of it was, and was reasonably reached). That's right, give them experience points for running away, provided it was reasonable to do and done well, and they had at least some difficulty in doing so that they had to overcome. Just be sure not to give so many as to encourage players to always run away — what you want to encourage them to do is role-play well and think.

Beginning Characters

Things To Think About

There are some things to keep in mind as a G.M. about many characters who are just starting their adventuring careers, that generally go largely neglected. Here we go, for starters let's take those characters that everyone loves, the guy with his own

power armor suit, robot, the 'Borg, the Juicer or the Crazy. What do all of these characters have in common? Yeah, most people's first thought will be that they're all generally pretty heavy hitters in combat, but what else do they have in common?

The other thing they have in common that a lot of players and G.M.s don't seem to think about or consider, is that they will probably all fall into one of the following categories:

a) They're so far in debt their characters wonder if they'll ever see the day where they aren't.

b) They're in the service of some employer agency or organization.

c) Their equipment is stolen or similarly they've skipped out on agreed-to service for their bionic body or Juicer/M.O.M. conversion.

The fundamental point is that characters with a ton of great starting gear have some major drawbacks or limitations as a trade-off for that gear. Nobody I have seen has run or played this correctly to date. Try to remember, the characters are driving or wearing a fortune. I haven't been in any RPGs where the characters were intentionally meant to begin with a fortune with no strings attached.

Entrepreneurs

In the case of the characters owning all their stuff, but being in debt up to their eyeballs, just think of having a car you drag race professionally that you drive around town, with an estimated value of \$500,000. Or upon turning twenty years of age, you decide to go into business for yourself. You don't open up a store, but decide buy your own private jet (which you can fly) for \$2 million, and you intend to make your living off it. That's a good comparison to your guys in power armor suits that they own themselves. As for the characters with robots of their own, that's sort of comparable to you buying yourself a 747 jumbo jet. Kind of makes you think twice about your character's gear, namely, that tons of people will want to steal it, and that the character should want to be very careful about avoiding damage to it if possible. Anybody royally peeved at them might be able to very easily do a ton of damage that costs an insane amount to fix, so they might also need security for their gear and equipment.

Being A Gopher

In the second case, when they are in the service of some employer or organization, it is very important to remember the player characters may have little say in the use of their issued equipment. It is also extremely important to remember that although it may have been issued to them for use in the performance of their job, IT IS NOT THEIR EQUIPMENT! So if some power armor pilots are issued SAMAS suits and they bring them back all shot up and busted to heck, their superiors are going to want to hear an awfully good reason why, not "We saw a demon and decided to attack it." This would probably get a response like, "Well, it's very interesting to hear that, Private. Now I just want to know WHEN YOU DECIDED YOU COULD START MAKING YOUR OWN DECISIONS!! What if you just cost a platoon their lives, because you decided to shoot a few nasties on a joy-ride patrol when we *needed* those Sams as a support unit to save their behind if things went bad?? You're in luck, because I'm not going to court-martial you, but

in the future YOU WILL FOLLOW ORDERS OR YOU'LL WISH THE DEMONS GOT YOU TODAY!!! AM I PERFECTLY CLEAR??” As should be obvious, unless the player characters received specific authorization from their employer or organization to use their equipment in a certain way or for a specific purpose, they could get themselves in trouble and get their resources and equipment cut off. Superiors in the CS may not have wanted to unnecessarily incite the locals, which requires diverting resources away from where they could be put to better use. Instead, maybe thanks to the player characters, they now have to establish a CS presence there to maintain the fear in the locals, who wouldn't have been a problem but for some trigger-happy players. Needless to say, the superiors won't be too impressed if something like this happens; see the above for an idea of possible reactions.

Wanted by the Authorities

Some players will say their character stole their gear; fine, but don't let them get away with it. The authorities will be hunting for them, and most large organizations have a lot of resources they can call upon to find and hunt down thieves. This should make life very inconvenient for the player character a lot of the time, as they have to hide, skulk around and not be too visible or they risk having a few dozen bounty hunters or law enforcers after them (or more numbers than they can handle, for sure). People will be looking to turn them in if there's a reward, and they will have to be very inconspicuous and secretive pretty much all the time. This could be tough if they stole a suit of Glitter Boy armor, or something equally noticeable. Generally the more valuable or better the equipment they start with, the more they'll get noticed. This could include people recognizing them, ratting them out or reporting them to the authorities, blackmailing them, etc.

Advantages and Disadvantages to Great Equipment

Remember that everything has its advantages and disadvantages, and that there's no such thing as a perfect life or character. Just think of people; everyone has their problems, despite the fact that most people have the delusion that the famous and wealthy are automatically happy. Wealth and fame don't ensure happiness, just like having awesome equipment doesn't mean a character won't have his or her share of problems. The thing to always remember as a G.M. is that every advantage has a disadvantage, and to have a broad enough view to see as many of them as possible. Like the best equipment attracting all kinds of other problems the player probably didn't think of.

Vice-Versa: The Littler Guys

Correctly role-playing the most common situations like huge debt, being somebody's stooge, or being wanted by the authorities for characters starting with very expensive equipment, makes another advantage for the weaker or little guys if played the way it should be. They require little overhead or major financing, something which can really make a difference if you're looking at things from a profitability or maximizing efficiency angle. Mages and psychics don't have to pay to use their powers or replenish them, they can do so free, and at will. The weak characters don't need much money, or professional services such as Operators to fix or repair gear, when they're only using

basic equipment, a definite advantage in many cases. This can make a big difference if you start adding some realism to the mix. Just think about the Coalition States; sure it has some of the most advanced technology around, but using and maintaining that high technological level comes with a very, very large price tag, be it in credits or resources.

G.M. Favoritism

A Bad Thing

G.M. favoritism is a problem in some games, that G.M.s should try to completely avoid. I am generally referring to any situation where the G.M. gives special privileges or in-game benefits to particular players, classes or anything else to a noticeably higher extent than some others, without a justifiable reason.

G.M. favoritism can get to the point where it is very, very bad though not quite PURE EVIL. The G.M., more than anyone else, has to keep an open mind and definitely not run the game in any way seeming like they're favoring one character, class or anything else. The G.M. in particular has to be careful not to let personal bias creep into his or her game, or to keep it to a minimum. So if they think that magic, or tech, or psionics stink, or dislike them for some reason, players who play these characters of specialty (whichever one G.M. doesn't like) could be at a disadvantage every time in every situation, as the G.M. arbitrarily dismisses their efforts, due to the G.M.'s personal taste. A good example of this would be a mage using some kind of stealth magic such as Invisibility: Simple, Cloud of Smoke or Shadow Meld, which the G.M. counters with everyone and everything the mage encounters having infrared vision. This is just unfair to the player who chose to play the mage, and unnecessarily so. At the least, you have to let players try to use what their characters can do without dismissing them with a wave of the hand because you don't like them. This is harder than it sounds, because everyone has their own preferences. I know I tend to be a little too hard on combat maximized characters, myself. Of course, it's completely unrealistic to expect a totally impartial and fair game from a human G.M., but you *can* try your best not to do this, which is all that can be reasonably asked.

Players Have More Fun

Generally, the better you are at avoiding favoritism, the better it makes the game, because everyone sees they are being treated the same. Players who aren't the "favorite" usually tend to quickly resent the favorite's special treatment by the G.M. Use your head when striving for this, as in some cases the player has to expect some flak if they try and insist on playing an inappropriate character for the game the G.M. has in mind. A CS soldier tagging along with a group of mages in the Magic Zone, for example, should expect to be the first target of a lot, and maybe even most, enemies' attacks, particularly enemies who are magic-using beings or CS-persecuted D-Bees. In cases like this, the player is pretty much asking for the treatment they get, similar to a player wanting to be a mage in a CS squad.



Technology

Scavenged Equipment Is the Norm

I think scavenged equipment is a very, very important aspect of Rifts which is either entirely ignored far too much, or which there are rules for which probably detract from the actual concept. Scavenged equipment is very important to consider in any Rifts game. Characters don't always have brand new guns, armor and equipment, since in the world of Rifts people are always scavenging old equipment and fixing it up or trying to fix it. As a matter of fact, I think characters with new equipment would definitely be the exception and not the rule. Besides the issue I already mentioned of no one being able to afford it, how many beat up old suits do you think a pilot is going to be able to restore to pristine condition on their own? By that I mean without incurring the large and high costs of professional (Operator) services and help. Even characters who are Operators probably wouldn't have access to the resources to fix a really expensive vehicle completely, to the point where it's just like brand new.

It peeves me big time that a lot of players usually ask for and usually get equipment that most player characters probably shouldn't have, if you're actually trying to play Rifts as a post-apocalyptic game. They're not supposed to have all the latest cool gadgets and newest weapons, they're supposed to have scavenged most of their equipment, meaning it's probably beat-up, half-busted and thrown together with bubblegum and a band-aid. I find this type of image more suited to Rifts than characters in polished, brand new armor with all the new tech gadgets that a lot of players seem to have.

Rifts: Post-Apocalyptic

I prefer to try and make things a little more realistic and rekindle or obtain more of the post-apocalyptic atmosphere I feel Rifts was originally supposed to represent. I think the G.M. should emphasize the fact that a lot of the characters' equipment that was scavenged saw some very considerable wear and tear before they got hold of it, and is definitely not in perfect shape. As well, the players generally just wouldn't have had any way to gain access to the resources necessary to bring their equipment up to "brand new" standards or condition. Even a starting Operator wouldn't have access to all the special tools and materials they'd need to patch up a robot or power armor. They might be capable of doing the work, if it's something simple like replacing the armor (if that is simple; I'm not a mechanic, so bear with me), but not have the materials or tools, or be able to afford them. When I think Rifts, I think post-apocalypse, which means old, run-down equipment the vast bulk of the time, not polished stuff right out of the factories.

Actually this premise is stirring up some of my creative juices a bit. I think next time I get a player with an Operator character, they won't get a starting vehicle, but I will have them come across a beat-up and damaged robot vehicle. I'd intend for this to be a major find, the Operator should be excited to discover it's still fully functional, though most of its munitions would be gone (scavenged or used) and it would have taken considerable damage (half or a third its M.D.C. or something similar, with lots of other bugs and glitches to fix). The point is, if the player is role-playing well, their character should be excited by this, and thinking of the potential of what they can do with the robot to fix it up, much like a mechanic today finding an antique car that has the potential to be restored to perfect condition.

Making Static Characters Progressive

The easiest way to do this for most static characters, particularly ones that rely heavily on technology, is to use their gear. This relates a little back to progressive characters, as it would provide a way for a non-progressive character to be more or less made into a progressive one. In the above Operator example, the character himself might not actually progress much, but he could keep further repairing, modifying, adding to, and rebuilding his robot. Eventually (at higher levels), maybe he'd even get it back into near perfect condition, or at least as close as you could come with an older machine. If you make the player work hard for this, he should become attached to the robot that his character personally rebuilt.

Beat-Up Junkers Can Add Tons of Flavor

Personally, I think having characters find old and beat-up, but still cool equipment is a treasure trove of ways to add to the atmosphere, personality and setting of the game, as well as get the players more interested and excited. The only problem with this is you may have to get the players accustomed to a more stingy approach than they may be used to. They may tend to gripe about not having new equipment any more if you switch to this approach from a "give them anything they want" style. Giving the extra details and nuances about gear and mechanical

things that have seen some wear and tear does require more work on the part of the G.M., but it can add immensely to the game if you can do it right.

The players who start CS characters with a brand new CS Skull Smasher will probably not be as excited as a group of Scholars and Adventurers (say, all normal humans) coming across an old CS Enforcer buried in debris in Old Chicago. The Enforcer may only have a quarter of its rail gun ammunition, no missiles and a third to half of its M.D.C., but can be made to function and bring its initially stiff and creaking, but still sturdy joints to life again, with little effort on the part of the Operator. But that may be all that's needed to easily deal with a threat that otherwise is pretty dangerous to the party. Say, a handful of bandits with little wimpy laser rifles in the vicinity looking for them.

Don't give players stats in the initial situation, say they had to do a rush look and they won't be able to tell in more detail (the stats) until they do a full maintenance check and numerous tests with better tools and equipment. "After spending a couple hours doing a very basic rough check with the tools you have checking the armor integrity you think it has around 25-50% of the original armor strength. Most of the main motor functions, limbs and joints seem to be relatively intact. However, you'll need a full blown mechanic shop to do a thorough and accurate test."

Demonstration

An in-game example of this particular case might go as follows, "The Enforcer thrums as engines probably years silent on minimal output surge to life again with some reluctance. The bulk of the Enforcer groans as its servos and motors bring its still formidable strength to the task at hand, and debris shifts and tumbles away as the CS bot once again stands up, the skull's scarlet, menacing infrared eyes flickering to life once more (hey it's role-playing, play it up!). Jack (the Operator/pilot) brings up the sensor display and instantly notes that the radar is completely unreliable and on the fritz, and infrared is pretty spotty, but both are actually functioning. Jack should be able to improve them if he can get the right parts and spare a few hours, but for now, main visual seems to be the only reliable sensor. Just as you switch back to it, you spot a slight movement in the debris a few hundred yards to the left, as normal visual is coming back on line. You're not sure if it was just a glitch in the sensors or not, it probably hasn't functioned in years..." "...as you start the Enforcer running after them, you feel a jagged vibration running through and shaking the entire bot. You're pretty sure the drive-train is shot and needs to be replaced, it sounds pretty bad. You figure that if you try and push it, you'll wreck it completely and the Enforcer will be immobilized until you can replace it. Until then, you figure you can probably only use about 25% of its speed, and even that might be stretching it."

Leave Some Things to Chance

Okay, I really, really like the idea of some of the old machines being sturdy and built to last through a beating and weathering the passage of time. On top of that, still being up to the task when it comes to the crunch. Everybody's got to have some things that they find really cool, and this is one of mine. This type of scenario is the kind of thing I like about

post-apocalyptic adventures, and that since the equipment is old and somewhat run down (if it even still works) it heightens the suspense in the game. "Does the old Enforcer still have enough kick left?" should be going through all the players' heads in the above or a similar situation. Make them sweat a little by making the situation a lot trickier if it doesn't hold out, and don't automatically make the good old junker work (or at the least, drag it out a bit); it really is lots more interesting when you leave it to chance. A lot of the time it's players trying to get through tough situations when things are going wrong that make for some of the most fun and memorable role-playing sessions; a lot of players can be very inventive and imaginative when they need to be. Remember "Necessity is the mother of invention," leaving things to chance will make it a necessity from time to time, giving the players a really good reason to be inventive or creative with ideas, plans or actions.

Think of Real Life Mechanics

Ideally you want the Operator in the above scenario to be thinking like a mechanic today who finds an antique car they can restore. In other words, they should just about be jumping up and down upon finding an old, durable machine they can fix up and put to good use. i.e.:

G.M.: "The stabilizers look pretty worn, but still in pretty good shape, and the frame is in downright amazing condition considering it's probably just been sitting there buried for years. The motor joints on the arms look pretty iffy, they might go at any time, and the legs could probably use a good grease job, but for the moment, it looks like you've found a fully functional robot."

Player (in-character): "Wow, just look at this! The body's in great condition, and the joints are still working! Yeah, the motor's going to need some work, and the body needs to be touched up and patched a little, but that's not too bad. I can't wait to get this baby rebuilt and fixed up! It'll be one slick machine once I get done with it! I can't believe how lucky we are to have found this! What a beauty!"

Think of Movies

Just think of sci-fi movies, the ships the characters fly are usually definitely not in top-notch condition, running smooth as oiled glass. Instead they're the ships the company was too cheap to repair, or the budget version which stinks, etc. This makes them more interesting; in some cases, they're emphasized as the old rust-bucket that sure doesn't look too impressive, or seem very reliable, but which usually comes through in a pinch when the chips are down. Take a good look at the extra storytelling opportunities some of these create by not being a perfectly-running ship. The ship won't start, at least until someone punches it, kicks it, or otherwise gives it a good whack, adding humor and suspense. The crew may have to limp somewhere in order to make repairs, giving a ton of opportunities to take the story in any direction depending where they went. Not to mention the humor when the pilot is sure *this* time that broken servo connection is finally fixed, and when they hit the jump to hyperspace, nothing but a dull grinding comes from the engines. Moments like these are classics, and it all comes from not having a machine that's brand new or which always functions perfectly. Besides, just ask any homeowner if they never have any problems with their house, or a car owner if nothing ever needs

to be fixed on it. This style of gaming makes things seem more realistic.



Give Important Machines Some Character

Throw in some quirks here and there that show the ship or machine has a little character of its own! Stuff like this might help players get attached to their equipment for its role-playing value instead of just its stat numbers. Besides, there's always the angle of the devil you know; the players should come around to the thinking of most people who own cars. What I mean is, they could sell it and try to get something better, but they might end up with something that's even worse, and more of a lemon than what they already have. So yeah, they know the joints tend to grind in their robot vehicle because it's bad for wearing out the bearings (I'm just talking gobbledygook), but they know it's just an irritant and annoyance if it's checked frequently and watched. Sort of like "Oops — forgot to check the oil in the car, junked the engine as a result." Whereas if the power converter in a robot they trade it for is bad, it could cost hundreds of thousands of credits to replace, like the engine in a car is very expensive to fix. You think there aren't any equivalents of used cars or used car salesmen in Rifts in the Black Market crowd?

Use Junkers to the Players' Advantage Once in a While

The ideal situation is to try to eventually have something that's been a problem or irritant for the players work to their advantage, as it suddenly becomes a problem for the villain or villains. Saboteurs might not know that they really shouldn't try poking around with the power conduits because the ship has a tendency to have random power surges run through them, even

though it should be completely safe on a ship in perfect shape. For example, the players end up in a real jam because trying to run the ship at maximum thrust too soon after takeoff always makes it stall (not crash, just stall), and then it requires a half hour's work on the engines before they'll work at more than a quarter of capacity again. The first few times this happens you can bet dollars to donuts the players aren't going to be too happy, it will be very annoying and troublesome to them when it happens (but it should add to the interest of the game). However, the players should be filled with glee when a villain tries to steal their ship and the same thing happens to them. i.e.:

NPC: "He's getting away!!!"

Player Character, with sardonic grin: "Don't worry, he's not going far."

Players Enjoy Villains' Misfortunes

It's sort of along the lines of other people being forced to share in your misfortunes, you just feel good that you're not the only one who gets ripped off. It's like a sense of satisfaction, you had to go through that, and now you get to be on the smug end and it's someone else's turn. This also lets the players know things go bad for everyone, and it also emphasizes that there are benefits to having a junker instead of a spotless new machine, even if they do come with their share of problems. You can also use it as a reason for villains to be a little more wary of the player characters if they don't know much about them. For example, the player characters' ship's hyperdrive is broken, but the villains don't know that.

Villain: "Why aren't they jumping to hyperspace? They must have some trick up their sleeve. Well, we won't fall for it, proceed with utmost caution."

Technology Has Problems Too

One of my solutions to players thinking technology has no flaws is to toss in all the little problems the books don't mention with technology — spotty goggles that fritz due to a bad wiring design or too touchy or got bumped a bit and now don't work great, guns jamming or the energy equivalent like an energy overload and can't fire temporarily, engines not putting out quoted specs performance due to exaggeration by the manufacturer, misfires of missiles, they won't fire or duds or no detonation, etc, etc, etc. Not every single time, mind you, but these things do still happen, and I think it's good to remind players technology isn't perfect or flawless.

Using Imagination

I Leave "Official" Rifts Behind in Many Ways

For myself, I have to pretty much ignore much of the main Rifts world happenings entirely to get a true feeling of imaginative wonders flowing. I think this is because I already know that what is actually going to happen in Rifts Earth is going to be determined by someone else (Kevin Siembieda and others) and I'll have absolutely no influence or effect on the way the "official" scenario unfolds. So if you put me in a Rifts scenario I expect to be expanded in soon to be coming future books, I just can't seem to get anything going, imagination-wise. Or I do, but nothing pans with the official book. However, give me my own

world to invent and play with, changing in any way anything I want, and all of a sudden I have tons of ideas. I can still use the main elements of the world of Rifts Earth, and I do pull a lot of ideas from there, but for me to really get my creative juices running at maximum output, I really need to go down my own storyline path as a G.M. I also think this is better for the players, as in a game I run, I try to have the players feeling they *can* affect and change the game world to a great degree. Though they may not, I always try to make sure the players have the ability to do so, or at least to try with the possibility of it working or happening. My advice is to go with whatever works best for you, whatever stirs that imagination and creativity that all G.M.s have and are trying to work into the games they run.

Picture It - Don't Calculate It

Remember that I'm trying to communicate the ability of tapping into your imagination and creativity, let those wonders in your head you've been playing with take form and come to life. The way I do this is to think of a place or character in my imagination, like something or someone you might expect to see in a movie or novel, and think to myself, "What would be cool?" or "What would make them more cool or interesting?" It seems a lot more fun and interesting to do this than to be thinking of new things that are revolving around stats and bonuses, detailing them in many ways that aren't even necessary or that won't matter in the game. I may even use things that have already been detailed in previous books, usually O.C.C.s, but when being creative and imaginative the ones I use are the ones I find cool without the stats, or with only a very cursory sense of the stats. For example, Lizard Mages are cool, regardless of their actual stats, just because of their mastery of magic (which gives a lot of leeway to the G.M. — think they haven't invented any spells of their own?) and general disposition (arrogant, but most times hide it or play it down). I don't really care about exactly what their spells or psionics can do, it's that picture in Rifts Conversion Book 1 and my mind of them that makes them cool. I'm not measuring or even comparing anything by any kind of measurable scale, I'm just picturing them in my mind and I find them cool and appealing.

Efficiency vs Style - Do it with Flair

When it comes to using your imagination for what's cool, I believe style and flair (well-executed, not too overdone) beat efficiency hands down the vast majority of the time in entertainment value. One of my favorite things to do is to have a mage use Invisibility (either) then make a dramatic and startling (to the NPC) appearance by casting a suitable spell that also cancels the Invisibility simultaneously, just because it's cool.

For example, coming very close to the NPC unnoticed, then using a spell like Circle of Flame (assuming it's M.D.C. — the S.D.C. one is completely useless) to surround both the NPC and the mage, or Blinding Flash (for starters, or any number of other spells — be creative and try to think of ways to use existing ones). In my mind a circle of fire suddenly sprouting up to life out of nowhere and a mage then appearing out of it is just cool, particularly at night. "Out of the darkness of the night a circle of flame appears, clearly no normal fire, and after a moment the flames lower to reveal a man standing behind them." It's a dramatic entrance that I think should get experience points for using spells to role-play, even if doing so isn't particularly useful

in terms of damaging the villain. It's the effect it has on people psychologically that needs to be emphasized, and which may be a little neglected in some games (this should scare the beejesus out of small fry Joe Average, Normal Guy NPCs, and can be used to great role-playing effect). I try to add to this any way I can, such as coming up with good lines to say after casting the Circle of Flame, "You will not escape now that you have aroused my anger!" or "Your allies cannot save you from my wrath!" or "Did you think I had not noticed your actions, or that you would not have to pay the price?" Or you could go for cheesy if you're running a humorous adventure, "My burning fury has been unleashed, prepare to feel the anger of my righteous fire!" Imagine those scenes in your head compared with "I cast Circle of Flame around him," or "I cast Blinding Flash." They just don't stir the imagination or have a sense of style, flair, or coolness like the others. Maybe the players will even adopt one or another particular spell or combination as being their signature entrance or some such, or if they don't, you can always have the villain do so, great for anticipation.

G.M.: "Suddenly the street ahead is obscured by a cloud of thick smoke; a moment later, even though it has been calm all evening, the wind suddenly picks up, blowing the smoke away, and you see a lone figure now standing in the middle of the street."

Player: "It's him again! I'm gonna get that bozo if it's the last thing I do!"

Role-Playing Value Only

Something to keep in mind is that using powers and abilities like this is only good for its role-playing value. Therefore, the G.M. has to make sure this has noticeable benefits in the game and does not seem like a pointless or wasted effort, if they do want to encourage such play. If it takes half a mage's P.P.E. to do something impressive and cool, something like that should have an effect on most people, be it inspiration, awe, fear or intimidation among many others, the whole range of reactions. It should not simply be a waste of effort if you can picture it as being something pretty cool to do or stylish, otherwise players just aren't going to bother, and you're probably going to have some trouble convincing a lot of players anyway. Think of the reactions a good speaker can draw from an audience; they can be pretty dramatic. The spellcaster or psychic gets the extra ability of being able to throw in some really dramatic special effects or downright amazing demonstrations. Don't underestimate the effect these kinds of things can have on people. Karl Prosek knows well the ability of the one or the few to move the many to action and unite them in purpose, as well as the amazing potential of the many once you've started them working together.

Think Movies Again

I feel that a lot of the potential role-playing of a ton of cool character classes in Rifts has been almost completely overlooked due to a preoccupation with stats. Look at your favorite character classes and imagine them in Rifts: The Movie. What would they need to do to make them cool and appealing and interesting to the audience? Shooting more and bigger critters? Hollywood has proven over and over that bigger and bigger explosions by no means necessarily make for a better movie. Sure, special effects can add a lot to a movie, particularly sci-fi ones, but if the story and character development or acting is weak, the

special effects can only go so far without them. For the movie to be great, all elements have to be strong. The best example I can think of is *Aliens*, it had lots of special effects, yeah, but it also had a great story, lots of character development and good acting. The grunts are blowing away lots of aliens, but the reason you like Hudson or anyone else isn't because he got the most kills. It's because you identify with his attitude and personality, and can see how he's a normal guy in a crazy situation, or maybe something else, but I don't think it's because he killed 10 aliens instead of 5. James Cameron usually does a good job of emphasizing the humanity of his characters in his movies, which many directors either miss or seem to have trouble doing. I feel the G.M. is generally trying for the same effect, getting the players to like the characters they're playing because of who they are, not what a great combatant they are. The characters' basic humanity is often overlooked in the face of stats in my opinion.

Try To Make Sense

Although there are no rules for using your imagination, it's generally better if you try to have things make at least a little sense instead of just going for doing whatever you feel like because you think it's cool. Generally, most people will find your stuff better the more sense it makes. This is because more people will be able to identify and agree with your line of reasoning, and more people like to find someone who agrees with them than disagrees with them. You should have some decent reasoning behind ideas whenever possible, otherwise you may end up with a lot of players wondering "What the heck? Where did this dumb idea come from?"



Get Yourself Published

Heck, a good project for anyone who wanted to be published in *The Rifter*® would be to start taking the best O.C.C.s (many of which lie neglected, in my opinion) and start writing up reasons why it'd be fun to play this character outside of their stats. Some people who like particular character classes have already done this, namely with the Techno-Wizard, Rahu-Man, and Operator. Though these included a lot of stats, I think the stats are largely unnecessary. It's the insight into the character, looking at the world from their perspective, that makes it interesting. The essay on playing magic users in Federation Of Magic is what you should probably use as a basis of what to shoot for. Generally, try to think of things that most people tend to forget about, talk about aspects of the character you'd expect to see or notice in a movie but don't see in the stats. Assuming you can come up with some good points and can write fairly well, I think you probably have a good shot of making the cut. Make it interesting reading, I'd say that means don't write about anything concerning bonuses or dice at all, only adding these at the end, if you must.

Psionics — Adding Some Random Chance

An Argument for Randomly Determining Minor & Major Psionic Powers

Now I'll talk a little about psionics and psychics, particularly major and minor ones that do not get their psionics because of their O.C.C. or R.C.C. I find the fact that characters who have a non-psychic O.C.C. can choose their psychic powers to be somewhat annoying and very unrealistic. People do not sit down and choose what psionic powers they will develop if they have some minor or latent psychic ability. Instead, their powers will just manifest one day, and initially the psychic will probably have no idea they are causing it.

Only master psychics (R.C.C.s/P.C.C.s) have the degree of control over their powers to develop them the way they want, since this is what they do for a job or occupation. However, a grunt isn't going to have the luxury of saying to himself, "You know, Sixth Sense might be a great way to avoid getting killed, I think I'll develop that ability." The real scenario is more likely that one day the grunt and his platoon are trudging along when suddenly he has a flash, a vision, which ends up coming true seconds or minutes later! Or one of his fellow grunts is injured and while checking him over, the grunt suddenly feels power flowing through him and his friend is healed! Almost any power can develop, and totally at random, not just the power the player or character wants. What psionics minor and major psychics develop is NOT a conscious choice.

By randomly determining psionics, you make it much more likely that there will be a broad variety of powers both used and encountered by the players. This is likely to better reflect reality, instead of the common and typical "best" powers which every psychic may seem to have. Psychics are not all going to have the same abilities, in fact it would be quite rare for any two to have the same psionics. I find there's usually a tendency for most players to pick Mind Block, Sixth Sense, Telepathy and Telekinesis above most other powers. How many G.M.s out there have players who choose Ectoplasm or Resist Thirst?

A More Interesting Game

Random psionics can add a lot to the role-playing element of the game, as the player (and character) may not particularly want the power or ability they receive. This is realistic as maybe the character doesn't like their ability, or even want it. Nevertheless, they are the ones who have it. "Do you think I like knowing what other people are thinking all the time? Trust me, you'd rather not know." or "Oh, if only I were a Telekinetic! Why did I have to be a healer?" I'm sure you can recall some similar examples from movies or novels.

You may feel it better to keep the powers a little similar to the character's personality if you feel that affects the development of psionics. I prefer to keep psychic abilities almost totally random. No one can explain why some people get them and others don't, and very few can control what powers they get. So the combat happy player may end up with the psionic powers

Healing Touch and Resist Hunger. Whether or not he uses these powers, or can find a way to use them, will be up to him, but I find it makes the game more interesting.

Psionics Can Help Flesh-Out Characters

Randomly determining psionics can also help players to flesh-out their character backgrounds. Instead of only asking What and When for psionics, also ask WHY! If you want to relate psychic powers to character personality, this should also help you in narrowing down possible powers when randomly determining them. I personally prefer to pick the powers and then develop the character, myself. For example, a character who has Speed Reading should have had some interest in reading. Maybe he was almost caught by the CS a few times, or was reading when someone could walk in at any time, so one day he suddenly started reading incredibly fast. An uneasy or nervous character who was always heading into dangerous situations might develop the power of Sixth Sense, as a "gut instinct" when he would've been killed in an ambush but for his power manifesting. A character who has the power of Mind Block may have had a traumatic experience which caused their power to manifest, such as spending time in a mental institution or being the captive of a serial killer (or horrible psychic monster). Or perhaps they had an abusive childhood.

Force a Little Background Development

The G.M. may want to consider the option of allowing minor or major psychic players to choose their powers on the condition that they must give a suitable background to justify their character having those powers. In other words, why does your character have the powers they do? I still prefer to determine them randomly; it adds more flavor to the game and seems more realistic. Then, instead of players thinking what will be the best powers to choose, they have to think of how they can use what they get. In addition, all the neglected powers that are still good for role-playing will now see much more use. How many players choose the Ectoplasm power over Telekinesis, anyway?

Wrap Up

So to wrap up, major things I hope to have you at least considering are progressive characters, let them advance and see their character growing in power and abilities. Experience points, use them to your benefit to have a game that's more fun for everyone as much as possible. With regard to strategic thinking, try to apply reason and reality a little to combat and violent situations. Remember technology in Rifts is most times post-apocalyptic, so gear will be heavily worn and broken down in many instances. Use your imagination and try not to get caught up in numbers, stats and dice too much. Finally, psionics may become more interesting if you add a little random chance to their selection. Again, hopefully this has given you some things to think about or ideas how to improve your games.

Questions and Answers

By Rodney Stott and Shawn Merrow

Welcome to the first in a series of Question and Answer columns for **The Rifter**®. We at Palladium Books receive a lot of questions about the various books over the Internet, and as a result we maintain a massive list of answers on our web site, but if you do not have access to the net, getting to these answers can be a bit of a problem. That is why we have decided to do this column. We cannot present all our archives at one time, but we can bring you a selection of answers.

This first column has the focus on modern weapons, energy weapons and missile weapons, and will cover not only single games, but draw answers from all of Palladium's games.

The column for the next issue will focus on magic and P.P.E. related questions.

If you want to ask a question, feel free to send an e-mail to rstott@palladiumbooks.com, or visit the Palladium Books Web Site at www.palladiumbooks.com.

— Rodney Stott & Shawn Merrow

Modern, Energy and Missile Weapons

How many attacks does my character start out with?

All characters, unless otherwise stated, start out with 2 attacks per melee, plus those gained from hand to hand combat

training, and boxing. Different races may add additional attacks, or have less than this.

For example, a human with Hand to Hand Basic will start out with 4 attacks per melee at level one, 5 if he has boxing.

The exception to this rule only applies to the martial art forms from **Ninjas and Superspies™** and **Mystic China™**, in which case the character only gets the number of attacks listed when using that form.

Do I add my P.S. damage bonus to M.D. melee weapon attacks? Do I add my P.S. damage bonus if I have Supernatural Strength?

The P.S. damage bonus is always an S.D.C. damage bonus, and is not added to M.D. melee weapon attacks.

However if the character possesses Supernatural strength or Robotic strength, the normal punch damage, if M.D., can be added to the damage inflicted with a Mega-Damage melee weapon. Again, P.S. damage bonuses do not apply to this.

For example, if you could do a 3D6 M.D. punch, and were using a weapon that did 1D6 M.D., you would inflict 4D6 M.D.

What exactly do I need to roll to hit?

That all depends on the range at which you are attacking.



If the target is less than 60 feet (18.3 m) away (including melee range), you need a 5 or better to hit.

If the target is 60-200 feet (18.3-61 m) away, this rises to an 8 or better to hit.

If the target is more than 200 feet (61 m) away, this rises to a 12 or better to hit.

If you are doing a "called shot," you will need a 12 or better to hit, and the G.M. may also apply penalties to the shot based on the difficulty of the target being aimed at.

If you are throwing grenades, you will need a 6 or better to hit instead of the normal 5 or better.

Is what I need to hit, a natural roll or do bonuses get added before seeing if it hits?

Yes, bonuses do get added before determining if a strike is successful. This means if your total strike bonus is +4 you will automatically hit, and the only way your opponent can stop this is to parry or dodge your attack.

Are there any penalties for hitting targets that are moving or beyond effective range?

You can fire most weapons beyond their effective range, but their effectiveness rapidly decreases. Firing beyond effective range is at no bonus to strike, and with a -4 penalty to strike for every 25 feet (7.6 m) beyond the effective range.

Moving targets are generally fired upon at -3 to strike, while there is a -6 penalty to strike anything speeding 40 mph (64 km) or more.

Both of these answers appear in *Ninjas and Superspies™*.

Do I use P.P. strike bonuses with modern, energy and missile weapons?

You do not use P.P. bonuses with these weapons. The W.P. Modern Weapons skill in the *Palladium Fantasy RPG®*, which gives P.P. bonuses to strike, is a special case rule for introducing guns into *Palladium Fantasy*.

What bonuses can be used with these weapons apart from W.P. bonuses?

Generally any bonuses intrinsic to the weapon, like balance, aiming/sights, etc. The Sniper skill for single shots with rifles also applies in some circumstances.

Do I add P.P. bonuses when throwing items?

Yes, P.P. bonuses are applicable when throwing weapons.

What is the penalty in *Rifts®* to dodge arrows, bullets and energy weapons?

This rule was covered in *Mystic Russia™*. We will summarize it here.

To dodge modern, missile and energy weapons you have a -10 penalty to dodge at short range, or -8 penalty to dodge at long range (500+ feet/152.4+ m) or when a lot of cover is available, and no dodge bonuses apply to the roll.

Alternately, you can forfeit all your attacks per melee and do nothing but dodge; in this case, the penalty is -6.

What penalties are there on Wild Shots?

If you have a W.P. in the weapon, wild shots are done without penalty; if you do not have a W.P. you will have a -6 penalty to strike. Additionally the G.M. may impose a -1 to -4 penalty to the Wild Shot for extenuating circumstances or extreme difficulties.

It states that you can only do long bursts or entire magazine bursts when shooting wild. What happens if you are using a single shot weapon or a pulse weapon?

In these cases the G.M. should assign an additional penalty of -4 to strike in addition to the standard penalties for shooting wild. Damage is for the single round or pulse shot that hits. If the shot misses, there is only a 10% chance of the round striking a bystander in the immediate area of the target (roll once for each bystander, until all have rolled, or one is hit).

What penalties are there on Called Shots?

All normal bonuses to strike when using called shots are halved; this represents the difficulty of the shot. Additional penalties may be applied for the size and difficulty of the target.



These additional penalties are sometimes listed in the statistics for various items, or more often assigned by the G.M.

The half bonuses rule, while not printed in **Rifts®**, appears in **Heroes Unlimited™** and **Systems Failure™**.

Heroes Unlimited™ 2nd Edition and Systems Failure™ give a smaller penalty to dodge that can be easily negated. Why is it different in Rifts®? Can I use this in Rifts® instead of the -8/-10 to dodge rule?

The rule from these 2 books gives a -4 to dodge on a natural roll, and this penalty to dodge can be ignored if the dodger has the initiative, or the attack is not aiming to kill. This provides a more cinematic/heroic feel to scenarios involving guns.

Yes, you could replace the -8/-10 rule from **Mystic Russia™** with the rule from **Heroes Unlimited™** if you want a more cinematic/heroic game.

What are the rules for parrying modern, energy and missile weapons? What about thrown weapons?

Parrying bullets, arrows or energy blasts is possible, but a suitable object for parrying like a shield, weapon, or piece of metal/wood is required. They cannot be parried with bare hands. If parrying is attempted, it is done with none of the usual parrying bonuses, and with a -8 penalty as well.

Parrying thrown objects is easier with only a -3 penalty to an unmodified die roll.

What O.C.C.s/R.C.C.s or Powers give bonuses to dodge and/or parry missile, modern and energy weapons?

Only select O.C.C.s and powers offer superior bonuses to dodging and parrying these attacks.

For **Heroes Unlimited™** a handful of super abilities provide bonuses, and the individual power description will detail what sort of bonuses the power grants, if any, for dodging or parrying bullets, energy blasts, or missile weapons.

In **Rifts®**, only some O.C.C.s give any bonuses, but some have argued that Juicers and other extremely agile characters should have bonuses to dodge, so if you wish, those with natural Auto-dodge could apply their Dodge bonuses to help offset this penalty, though it cannot be used to give a bonus to the dice roll (i.e. if the penalty is -6, and dodge bonuses total +7, the character does not have an overall +1 to dodge, but the -6 penalty to dodge is negated).

The Longbowman from **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®** has superior bonuses only against arrows.

What is "Rate of Fire: Standard" in regards to energy weapons?

Rate of Fire: Standard means that the weapon is capable of firing single shots (aimed or wild), and is only capable of firing bursts if it mentions it in the weapon description. For example, a Wilk's 457 Pulse Rifle is capable of firing a single shot, or a pulse burst (3 round burst).

The C-10 Laser Rifle, on the other hand, is capable of burst firing since it gives "Aimed, Burst, Wild" for its Rate of Fire.

The C-12 Laser Rifle, though, is only capable of firing single shots, or short bursts of 5 rounds.

How does Rate of Fire with Archery work?

The Archery Rate of Fire replaces the character's normal hand to hand attacks per melee. Each attack represents the ability to load, draw and fire a bow or other missile weapon.

This rate of fire is the maximum for that character, and other factors such as getting ammunition which is not readily available will reduce this ROF. I.e. drawing arrows from an open sheath, or stuck in the ground is done as part of the ROF, but locating a special arrow, or uncovering a covered sheath will reduce the number of bow attacks.

Also there are weapon limitations which may affect rate of fire. Many crossbows may require windlasses, or pulleys to arm the weapon. While the character might be able to fire 4 shots in a melee round, it might take one attack to shoot a crossbow, and then spend the rest of the melee reloading it for an effective Rate of Fire of once per melee.

How do I combine my Archery Rate of Fire with my Hand to Hand attacks?

Simply divide characters' normal hand to hand attacks by their archery ROF, to determine how many attacks/actions firing a bow is worth.

For example, if a character has 4 attacks per melee, and a ROF of 2 with a bow, each shot with a bow is worth 2 attacks. If the resulting number is odd, round up for determining how many hand to hand attacks a bow shot is worth.

I.e. if the character has 5 attacks, and bow ROF 2, a bow attack is worth 3 attacks, leaving two left over for other actions, or another bow shot.

Does the P.S. damage bonus apply to arrows and other missile weapons? What about thrown weapons, does the damage bonus apply then?

No, the P.S. damage does not apply to arrows and other missile weapons. With thrown weapons, the P.S. damage bonus does apply if the item is thrown/tossed with all their might, otherwise if throwing normally, P.S. bonuses do not apply.

There are no rules for cover; what rules can I use if someone is behind cover?

Cover is explained in the **Heroes Unlimited™ G.M.'s Guide**.

To shoot at someone who has cover, you must do one of the following:

A) Go around to his exposed side.

B) Flush him out into the open.

C) Use Called Shots (rolling 12 or better to hit, including bonuses) to hit any part of him that is exposed. Depending on how much of the target is exposed, the G.M. can impose a penalty to this shot.

D) Shoot through or destroy the cover. In **Rifts®**, destroying the cover is your best solution, though in **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Ninjas and Superspies™** and **Systems Failure™**, you can attempt to shoot through the cover, if the P.V. of the weapon is high enough.



What penalty is there to hit someone I cannot see (like shooting through cover, or at someone who is invisible)?

When you are attacking someone you cannot see, you have a -9 to your strike roll. This includes shooting at people who are invisible, concealed or behind cover when shooting through the cover.

Here is an example showing some of the answers above in practical use.

2 level one characters with Hand to Hand Basic, are both using NG-IP7 Ion Pulse Rifles, and wearing Bushman EBA.

Joe: 4 attacks per melee, +1 Strike, Parry & Dodge, +2 Roll, W.P. Energy Rifle.

Bill: 5 attacks per melee, +1 Strike, +2 Parry & Dodge, +3 Roll, W.P. Energy Rifle and Boxing.

The characters are almost 200 feet (61 m) apart when combat begins, and both roll for initiative.

Joe rolls 12.

Bill rolls 6.

Joe goes first.

Joe fires a burst from his NG-IP7 at Bill; he needs an 8 to hit (over 60 foot/18.3 m range and under 200 feet/61 m), he rolls a 6 to hit with a +1 bonus to strike for a total of 7. This is a miss.

Bill, seeing this, elects not to shoot at Joe, but seeks cover behind some M.D. walls.

Joe's turn again, and he fires another pulse burst, this time, since Bill is partially behind cover, he needs a called shot to hit, or can blast through the cover. He elects to try the called shot. He rolls a 13 to hit, with a +1 W.P. Burst bonus.

Since he is making a called shot his +1 bonus is divided in half and rounded up, so it remains +1, for a total of 14, he needs a 12 to hit so he hits Bill.

Bill elects not to dodge, taking the hit, so Joe inflicts 30 M.D. to Bill's armor, reducing it to 30 M.D.C.

Bill now gets his second action, and he fires a pulse shot at Joe. Since Joe is in the open, and the distance is greater than 60 feet (18.3 m), the number needed to hit is still 8. Bill rolls a 16, +1 from the W.P. making a total of 17, a hit.

Joe elects to dodge (using his next action), and rolls an 18. Since he is dodging an energy blast, he gets no dodge bonus, and a -8 to dodge (cover is available). This makes his total dodge roll a 10, he fails to dodge and takes a light hit (10 points) which reduces his armor to 50 M.D.C.

Since Joe dodged, Bill now gets his 3rd attack. He opens fire on Joe with another burst, rolling a 6 to hit +1 W.P. for a total of 7, and since the distance is over 60 feet (18.3) this burst misses.

Joe now gets his 4th attack, and runs for cover while firing wildly at Bill (attempting to hit the cover, so no called shot). Joe needs an 8 to hit the cover, but since he is firing wild with a W.P. no strike bonus applies. Also, because his weapon is single shot and not burst firing, the G.M. imposes an additional -4 to strike. He rolls a 13 to hit, striking the cover (if Bill was in the open, he could have hit Bill with this). Joe deals 40 M.D. to the cover, blasting a big chunk out of it. Joe is now out of attacks, but Bill is now in the open as his cover has been destroyed.

Bills turn, and his 4th attack. he fires a pulse shot at Joe and rolls a 10 to hit, with a +1 W.P. bonus. Since Joe is now behind some cover a called shot is required, the total roll is 11, and this misses.

Joe cannot attack, so Bill gets his 5th and final attack this melee round. He switches from Pulse to single shot and squeezes off a single ion blast at Joe. Bill rolls a 10 to strike, and has a +3 single shot strike bonus, which when divided by 2 for being called shot results in a +2 bonus to strike for a total of 12. This hits and Joe takes 15 points of damage, reducing his armor M.D.C. to 35.

This concludes the first melee round.

A new melee round starts, and both roll for initiative.

Bill rolls a 17.

Joe rolls a 16.

Bill gets to act first this time, and elects to keep firing single shots. Bill rolls an 11 to hit, with his +3 to strike (halved to +2) for a total of 13. He hits, and Joe again doesn't dodge, and takes another 10 damage, reducing his armor to 25.

Joe's turn, and he opens fire with a pulse burst at Bill who is now exposed. This means he no longer needs a called shot to hit, only requiring an 8 to hit. Joe rolls a 7, and with a +1 bonus from the W.P. he hits. Exposed and with damaged armor, Bill tries to dodge, and rolls an 18. Since cover is available, the penalty is -8, and this reduces his roll to 10 which still beats Joe's strike; Bill manages to dodge.

Bill, since he dodged, loses his next attack.

Joe continues to fire now that he has Bill on the defensive, rolling an 11 +1 to hit (total 12). Bill again elects to dodge, and rolls a 5, failing to avoid the attack. Joe hits Bill for 40 points of Mega-Damage, which destroys Bill's armor, and kills him.



A GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE...

DAMN IT!
WHERE ARE
THEY!?

chapter six



BY RAMÓN PÉREZ & THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE



THE SCANNER
ISN'T PICKING UP
ANY SIGNATURES
AT THE
RENDEZVOUS
POINT.

ANIKA, I CAN'T
KEEP DODGING
THEIR BLASTS
FOREVER!

THEN HOWS
ABOUT I RECYCLE
THOSE TIN CANS!

NOT YET SHAKES.
WE HAVE TO BUY THEM
MORE TIME...

... AS LONG AS WE
DON'T FIRE, THEY'LL THINK
THEY HAVE THE UPPER HAND,
AND WON'T CALL IN
REINFORCEMENTS.

LET'S CIRCLE
ONE MORE TIME.

INSIDE.

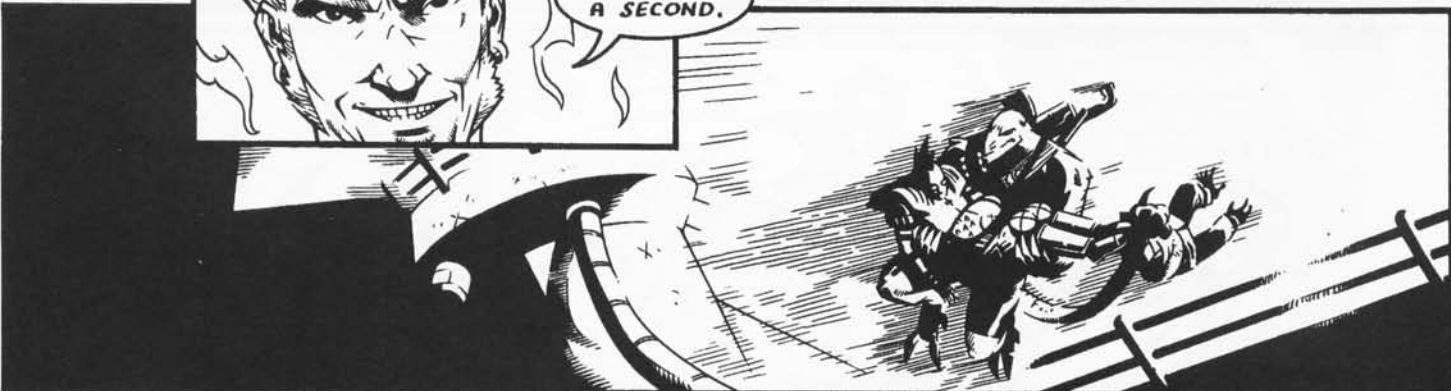
I BELIEVE HE MAY BE IN SHOCK.

WE MUST WAKE HIM.

THE AISHWARRA FEARS THE FLAME AND DIGS ITS ESCAPE. TIME IS SHORT.

CAPTAIN, THE MAGE'S SHIELD HAS FALLEN, AND THE BURSTER IS ... IS DOING NOTHING.

FINISH THEM OFF.







FOLLOWING THE CREATURE'S TRAIL.

I MAY NOT HAVE BOWIE'S TRACKING SENSE, BUT I THINK IT WENT THIS WAY.

LISTEN. THE AISHWARRA HAS STOPPED ITS DIGGING.



IT'S GONE.



MAGALI.

THAT MONSTROSITY YOU SENT OUR WAY DESTROYED OUR HOMES AND NEARLY KILLED US IN THE PROCESS!



SORRY. THINGS HAVEN'T GONE ACCORDING TO PLAN.

WE HAD A PLAN?



OH OH



HELLO DOCTOR. IT HAS BEEN QUITE SOME TIME...



YES. YES IT HAS ... HEH.



WE MAY BE FOLLOWED.

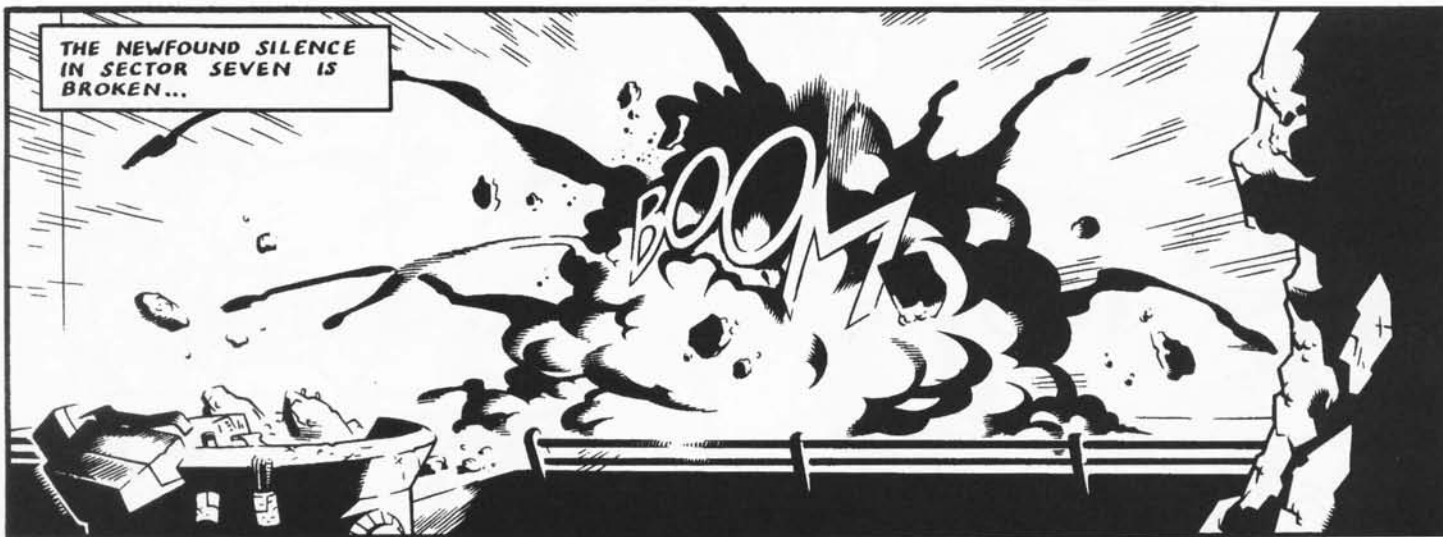


CABBY.



I LEAVE THE BEAST WITH YOU, WHILST I PREPARE FOR OUR GUESTS. GOOD HUNTING.

THE NEWFOUND SILENCE
IN SECTOR SEVEN IS
BROKEN...



DESERTED.
IT APPEARS THAT THE
CAPTAIN'S FINAL
ASSUMPTION WAS
CORRECT.



CORPORAL, YOU
ARE NOW IN COMMAND
OF CAPTAIN HERZOG'S FORMER
UNIT. TAKE YOUR MEN AND FOLLOW
THE CREATURE'S TRAIL. ITS NATURAL
INSTINCT WILL GUIDE IT TO THE
SURFACE, WHERE MY TEAM
AND I SHALL MEET
YOU.

REMEMBER
ELIMINATE ON
SIGHT.



DO NOT FAIL
ME CORPORAL,
UNLESS YOU WISH
TO SHARE YOUR
CAPTAIN'S FATE.



MEANWHILE ...

DAMN!
THAT WAS TOO
CLOSE !!

ANYTHING?

ZIP.

ENOUGH
OF THIS CRAP!
TIME TO SHOW 'EM
THIS DOG BITES
BACK !!



SHAKES!
THEY'RE ALL YOURS.
ENJOY!

CHUGGA
CHUGG
CHUGG

CRACK
CRACK
CRACK

OH YEAH.

HUH!





WHAT THE!!



YEAH, BABY, YEAH!

WHAT'RE YOU WAITING FOR?
MOVE IT!

DOWN BELOW...



HAVE YOU LOCATED THEM?



THE SCANNER MUST BE MALFUNCTIONING SIR, IT'S REGISTERING OVER THIRTY HUMAN-OLD LIFEFORMS.



LET ME SEE THAT.

AS THE DUST SETTLES.



WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ?



NO IDEA POOCHIE, BUT IT WAS BIG AND UGLY ENOUGH TO SCARE OFF THOSE SAMS FOR NOW.

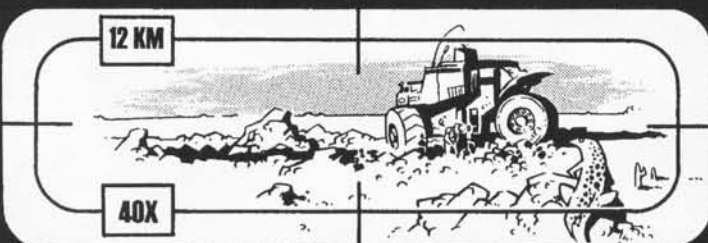
BUT LOOK WHAT IT DRAGGED IN...



OH NO.



I SEE 'EM, LET'S GO SAY HELLO BEFORE MORE COMPANY ARRIVES.



IT APPEARS OUR INTRUDERS HAVE FRIENDS, AND THEY ARE FOLLOWING THE CREATURES TRAIL NORTH. HRMM... .. INTERESTING.

IS THERE ANY RESPONSE FROM TEAM B ?



NONE.



DEAD THEN. AS INCOMPETENT AS THEIR FORMER CAPTAIN.



IT'S TIME TO END THIS. FETCH THE PACK.

Nightbane®

The Nightbane®

By Kevin Siembieda

Nathan had heard rumors about the Salvation of Light on the streets for months, but he ignored them. He didn't need no New Age religion for Nightbane. He wasn't like other 19 year olds. He had a life. Had a purpose. Knew what he wanted and didn't need anybody telling him otherwise. At least that's what he thought before he was "outed." Up until then, he had felt like a spy or comic book superhero living a double life.

"Nathan Panian, computer tech by day, and the menacing, self-styled crusader, *Blackstar*, by night."

Over the last three years he had met plenty of Nightbane — a lot of them were pretty cool, but others were bitter, depressed, wild or bordering on crazy. He had his run-ins with what passed for the law too, as well as minions of the Nightlords. He was no fool. He knew about Dark Day and the Nightlords' conspiracy to invade and dominate the Earth. Of course, that only seemed to add excitement and intrigue to his secret life. A life that was suddenly torn to shreds.

Three months ago he came home to find his parents brutally murdered. The police pinned it on him. They even had the murder weapon with his fingerprints and a rambling hate-letter explaining why he did it. He knew this had to be the work of a Nightlord or Nightprince he had crossed. The problem was, he didn't know who. Hell, he probably did it without even realizing it. The bigger problem was his public facade was destroyed. The news plastered his face across the television proclaiming him a junked-up psychotic, armed and dangerous — a wanted murderer who killed his own parents and who knows how many others. Friends, family and employer were all the enemy now. "Nathan Panian" was dead. Now there was only Blackstar, Nightbane crusader, hunted by the law and Nightlord minions day and night. For the last three months he had been living on the streets, stealing from crooks and minions to scrape by, living in cardboard boxes and derelict houses. Always on the move and afraid to trust anyone, even fellow Nightbane.

Looking at his reflection in a store window this morning, he realized he was losing it. He felt lost, sad, angry and terribly alone. Nathan saw himself becoming one of those Nightbane he used to put down and shake his head at. With nowhere else to

turn, he decided to check out a meeting of the Salvation of Light. One of the organization's leaders was speaking. Supposed to be a big deal, lots of Nightbane gathering, so why not go? If nothing else he could get a free hot meal and rest for a few hours where he could feel safe. If the sermon got too boring he'd just let himself nod off. Little did he know that his life would be forever changed that night. That he would find a new family and the direction he had always been stumbling toward without realizing it.

Welcome to the Salvation of Light

"We are the Nightbane.

"Although we hide in the shadows and are shunned by true men, we are creatures of light and the 'bane' of darkness. Dark Day triggered our powers. Made us more than human — and for most of us — monstrous. But we are human, born of soft flesh and warm blood. It is the touch of the night that makes us monstrous. Not as a punishment. Not as a vile brand that marks us so that we may be persecuted, but to remind us of the evil that we are born to fight. The evil that lurks in the shadows and comes in the night. An evil we must never forget and never accept into our own lives.

"We were born human ... and reborn as The Nightbane. A name given to us by the Nightlords themselves. A name in which our very purpose in life is spelled out. We are the bane — the ruination — of all things born of the night. We stand as sentinels against the spawn of the moon and the enveloping darkness that has leached into our world on Dark Day.

"Hence, the Nightlords and their dark minions loathe us. Fear us. Stalk us and destroy us, before we can destroy them.

"Don't wonder if what I say is true. Know it! Feel it. Embrace and savor it, for this is your destiny.

"Do you think it coincidence that the first of us were born on Dark Day? No!

"Is it by chance that the Nightlords fear us? No.

"And why not? Because we were born as part of some cosmic balance. We are the antibodies awakened to fight the disease that threatens humankind — a fatal darkness that we can see, smell, sense, and track clearly. Our eyes are opened to the evil of the Nightlords. Our sense screams at their presence and will not let us forget that they and their minions are all around us. For you see, our unique powers give us the ability to destroy them. More importantly, our humanity gives us the strength to stare into the face of darkness and pluck out its vile heart!

"For we are the saviors of our world. This is our purpose. Our destiny. Our sacred duty!



"Our appearance does not brand us as monsters but marks us as the eternal champions of light. Heroes who stand against the ever darkening skies of night. Our light — the light or our human souls and indomitable wills — gives us the real power to stand against the invading night and destroy the darkness. And together, destroy them we shall! For the creatures of the night are cowards who crawl back into the shadows before the light of justice and humanity.

"It matters not that true men fear us ... even kill us out of horror and ignorance. We are humankind's salvation, and though some of us are persecuted and die at the very hands of those we were born to save, we must stand strong and fight the good fight. We are NIGHTBANE! And together we shall stand strong and triumphant!"

— Part of a sermon from High-Father Raphael Alvarez, one of the three leaders of the Salvation of Light.

The Salvation of Light is an underground movement that is sweeping among the Nightbane like wildfire. It is part theology, part philosophy and part militia. The metaphysical bonded with war. A view of life for the disenfranchised Nightbane, which has begun to galvanize them as a people and give them strength of purpose. Even those Nightbane who reject the idea of "destiny" and being humankind's "saviors," find it difficult to refute the teachings of the Salvation of Light. Those like Nathan, who are heroes at heart or searching for a purpose, are quick to find their place among the movement, but even the most independent and embittered Nightbane are starting to wonder, as is exemplified by the words of gang leader, Slash-Man.

"Look, you don't need to blow sunshine up our ... you know what I'm saying, bro. The fact is, the first of us Nightbane were born on Dark Day, I'll give you that much. It's also true the Nightlords call us 'The Nightbane,' and engage in a campaign to destroy us like we was some kinda plague ourselves, but that don't mean we're natural enemies. Sure most of us Nightbane are resistant, if not impervious to most of the powers of the Nightlords, minions and 'creatures of the night.' Hell, me and the boys have kicked our share of minion and vampire butts. At least we got that goin' for us, cuz we ain't got much else, and your sweet words ain't gonna change that, brother. If our own supernatural and magical natures didn't give us an edge against the Nightlords and minions we'd all be dead by now. But that don't make us 'saviors,' 'antibodies,' or 'heroes destined to save the world' — come on, that's a bit too much, you know?"

"Sure, what you all say, makes a certain amount of sense in a sort of mythical — comic book — kinda way, but myths and legends are just fairy tales. Chosen heroes, magic, demigods, monsters and destiny is all fairy tales. I gave up fairy tales when I was a kid, and I gave up reading comic books when I discovered girls and booze at age 11, so don't be spinnin' me happy fairy tales or paintin' me as no hero. That type of thing don't happen in the real world. It just don't.

"I admit, what you 'Salvationists' say is appealing to some dudes. The words feel good. Real good. Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Like you belong to something important. Like your life has some higher purpose. Hearing them, even I begin to feel better about myself, motivated and inspired, and I've been livin' on the streets long before Dark Day done 'the change' on me. We would all like to think we be somebody special, powerful, important. Who don't want to see hisself as a hero? 'Specially misfits like us ... monsters who hide what we really are 'cuz the people you say we's destined to save, fear us, man. So much so that they run away screaming in terror at just a glance of one of our pretty faces. Or better yet, they grab their gun to cap us off, or knife, or a freakin' car to try to kill us. Don't say it ain't true. You know it's true! More than one of us has had somebody try to run them over with a car or truck. So I jus' don't like you tryin' to play us, bro. Save the hype for your believers, cuz none of us can get our heads wrapped around that 'saviors of the world' junk. That's one head trip we ain't ready to buy. We ain't no superdudes. All we is are messed up freaks. That's all. But we're freaks with power.

"Look. My point is, we ain't no heroes, so don't try to make us one. We be monsters — freaks and nightmares come to life, but we're up with that. Humans, you know, normals, they'd rather see us dead than messin' with their women, so I won't fight to save humanity. To hell with the normals! I'm a freak. We are all freaks! The sooner we all get this 'destined to be heroes' garbage out of our heads the better.

"Now that said, I ain't opposed to organizin' and fightin' the frickin' Nightlords — or vampires and werebeasts, for that matter — me and my boys are always up for that. Always. But I ain't no martyr or no hero, so just drop that line of bull. Me an' my boys are in it for revenge and thrills, baby. So if you want us, we're in. As for destiny, brother, I'm afraid all we're destined for is an early grave. Anything else is fairy tales."

— The retort of Slash-Man, a rogue Nightbane and charismatic leader of the Nightbane gang, the Bloody Claws, shortly before he and his entire band of 37 joined the Salvation of Light.

Being a hero is a heavy burden to carry and thus, many are slow to accept it. However, it does seem as if the Nightbane really are a side effect or counter-response to the coming of the Nightlords. And the potential instrument of their doom. The Nightlords know this and that's why they seek to enlist the Nightbane they can turn to their side (a tiny percentage) and destroy all others.

Gregor's Chronicle

— The Tale of a Lost Boy

By William Muench

Chapter 1 – *Mortis*

I am called Titania. I am one of the ageless Fae, the race that has inspired countless tales of hobgoblins, fairies, and wisps. Once I was a guardian of Eire, the land you know today as Ireland. But centuries ago, circumstances forced me to leave my protectorate as my charges were slaughtered by the Romans. I traveled for decades, helping where I could and doing what I was able.

After more years than I can remember, I arrived at the ocean's edge. I was so tired of the killing that was the hallmark of Europe. I left Europe, striding out across the waves towards the setting sun. I traveled for weeks, my magic keeping my feet firm upon the crests of the waves.

I finally reached a forested shore, seemingly untouched by man and his destruction. I could see no buildings; I could see no fires marring the skies. I thought that for once, I might be in peace. Alas, it was not to be so. After a few years I encountered a group of dark-skinned people who lived in harmony with the land. Although they too warred amongst themselves, they did not destroy the land and build ugly cities that marred the Earth. I sought to nurture them, to give these people my help in any way I could.

After centuries of wandering this new land, I finally found my home among a group of tribes who called themselves the Iroquois. I felt at home with them, at home with the land, a plateau cut with myriad lakes and heavily forested. The peace I felt almost made me believe I was back in Eire. They were suspicious of me at first. However, after I cured their sick with my breath, infusing life into those near death, they accepted me as a gift. For years afterwards I lived among the Iroquois, helping them, guiding them.

That's when Europe finally found me.

I had heard word of strange people building odd villages up the coast, buildings of wood and stone. Those buildings contained the seeds of destruction for my new people. Throughout the next four hundred years, my friends were driven from their homes, put in invisible cages called "reservations", and stripped of their dignity and their traditions. I was not caught, however. I remained in my new homeland, in the state of "New York." I traveled throughout the countryside, from the high mountains in the north to the rivers in the south. Helping wherever I could, I

became somewhat of a local myth. It was during my travels that I encountered the man I wish to tell you about. He suffered more than most on the day the Nightlords invaded Earth, on the day known as Dark Day.

* * *

Gregor Shelley smiled widely as his daughter Iris chased a chipmunk by the edge of the partially frozen pond, her pudgy little hands flailing. The chipmunk's chattering echoed among the trees of their campsite as dusk fell and the lively campfire threw shadows dancing across the ground. Greg turned to his wife Amelia and kissed her lovingly on the cheek, wrapping her in his arms. Smiling, he said, "Do you think she will ever get tired of terrorizing that poor chipmunk?"

Amelia grinned back, "Probably. Right about the time she discovers boys." A groan escaped Greg's lips. She continued, "But don't worry, we've still got a few years to prepare for that."

He muttered a quick "Thank God" as he lifted himself out of his small camp chair. Greg shivered slightly as the March wind caught him. "You want something to drink?" he called to his wife as he knelt down by the pot of boiling water on the little stove.

"Sure, how about some tea?"

Greg smiled, "Earl Grey, Captain?"

"No thanks. Just whatever we've got, wise guy. And quit making fun of my obsessions. They're healthy," Amelia replied with a smile.

"Yeah, spending a few hundred dollars to fly to a convention full of people with pointy ears is really healthy." They continued bantering with each other as Greg mixed up their drinks and returned with a steaming cup of tea and a mug of hot chocolate for himself.

He sat down and took a sip of his chocolate and let out a contented sigh. "It's always nice to get away from the University for the weekend, even if it is *only* for a weekend."

Amelia snuggled up closer to him and said, "It's nice to get away from ironing and cleaning for a weekend too, dear. At least here the cooking and cleaning is part of the fun."

"Honey, I know that you want to go back to work, but we both agreed when Iris was born that you would stay home and raise her and that I would work." Greg said with a frown, "I know you're getting tired of it, but we only have a few more years until Iris will be old enough to take care of herself. Then you can go back to work."

"Yeah, I know," Amelia sighed. "I love raising Iris and all, but it seems like I never get out of the house. I get to keep the house running while you work, and I know that's important. I just miss working at the hospital. I also have to deal with all the annoying people that come to the door. More of those Preserver people came by the other day and it took forever to get rid of them. They just wouldn't leave."

"I know its tough, honey. And I know you get tired of all those annoying salesmen, proselytizers, and everything else. At least those Preservers will be gone when the election rolls around and they fall flat on their faces," he said with a grin. Their platform of preserving America at all costs just didn't sit well with most people. Although many people were not happy with the government, few of them actually believed that the government was failing to protect the public.

"Yeah..." She paused for a moment in thought. She shook her head and said, "But we're not here to worry about life. We're here to relax." She looked at Iris, who was now sitting on a stump, engaged in a staring contest with the chipmunk. "Do you remember being that young? When I was eight, I used to go on camping trips like this with my parents." They both heard an indignant shriek and more chattering as Iris lost the contest. Amelia continued, "The thing is, I don't remember much about them. I remember sitting in the bottom of a canoe while they paddled around a lake, and I remember roasting marshmallows, but I can't remember much else."

Greg put his arm around her shoulders and took a sip of his chocolate. "Same here. I think that family camping trips are one of the constants of the universe. All families take them, but few kids remember much about them once they've grown up. They just remember a few details." He smiled, "And the bugs. We always seem to remember the swarms of annoying bugs." He paused, and then continued, "You know, the last thing my family did together before my parents got divorced was go camping. We drove to the Catskills and went hiking for nearly a week. That's the only campout I really remember in detail. Everything was great; my parents got along, we had great weather, and things were really looking up. Then we got home, my mom packed our suitcases, and we left. It never really made sense to me, because things had seemed to go so well on the trip." Greg shook his head. "As I look back on it now, I can see it was just the calm before the storm. They wanted to give me one good memory of the two of them together before they split up."

"Honey, they did what was best for you, even though it might not have seemed like it at the time. If they had stayed together, you would have had to deal with more screaming and violence. By taking you away from your father, your mom probably saved your life. You said that he let her take you, right? Maybe he realized what might happen if you stayed and he got angry again."

Tiring of the conversation, Greg sighed and nodded. "I've been trying to figure out why he let me go for years, Amelia. But I've never allowed myself to consider that he let me go because he loved me. You could be right. But it's a little late to

find out," Greg said, thinking of his father's funeral three years previous. It was a surprisingly tender moment dedicated to a harsh man. Greg had taken some perverse satisfaction in the lilies decorating the funeral parlor. His dad hadn't thought much of flowers.

Sipping her tea, Amelia said, "Somehow we got back to talking about real life again, Greg."

Greg stood slowly and set his mug on the ground, arching his back to make the vertebrae crack. He rubbed his back and said, "I'm getting tired, I think we should head to bed. I'll go get Iris. Why don't you go lay out the sleeping bags, honey?"

Amelia gathered the two mugs up and went to wash them in some of the water they had boiled earlier, while Greg walked a few yards down to the pond. As he approached, he watched Iris play. She was a slight, dark-haired waif, only eight years old and incredibly bright. At the moment, however, she was sitting on a log skipping rocks into the slushy pond like any other child. Greg sat down next to her and gave her a loud, wet kiss on her cheek. "Hi, pumpkin. Where'd the chipmunk go?" he said, smiling.

"I ran out of peanuts," she pouted, "but she said she'd be back tomorrow if I had more for her to eat." Iris brightened, "Do you think she'd like donuts? We'll probably have some left over in the morning."

"I'm sure she'd love some little pieces of donut. Don't give her any with frosting, though. It might make her sick."

Iris gave her father a slightly condescending look, "I know, silly. She told me sugar hurt her teeth."

Greg smiled, humoring his daughter. "I'm not surprised. She probably never goes to the dentist."

"That's because she's too small, Daddy."

"Well, you aren't, miss, and if you don't go brush your teeth you will be going to the dentist. So why don't you go brush them before you go to bed?" He smiled as she tried to wheedle her way out of it, trying to stay up a little bit later. Greg wouldn't budge, however, and she finally sulked off to brush her teeth and get ready for bed.

Greg sat there on the log, studying the stars. Although he was a history professor, he knew a bit about astronomy. He could pick out most of the major constellations. As he looked at the night sky, he could barely see the stars. He could only find three constellations: Orion the Hunter, Cassiopeia the Queen, and Hydra the Snake. The rest of the constellations seemed to be drowned out by the glow of Rochester to the north. Putting it out of his mind, he walked back up to the campsite.

Reaching his tent, he saw that Amelia had spread out their sleeping bags and put them on each side of the small tent, with a small space down the center where they could put their boots. Seeing that she was almost done, he went to tuck Iris in. Greg stuck his head through the flaps of her pup tent and found her already sound asleep, her cherubic face barely recognizable as belonging to the bundle of energy that had chased wildlife all night. Greg leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead, and then withdrew, making sure the flaps were tightly secured against any possible weather.

Greg slipped his boots off and crawled into his tent. He was greeted with the sight of Amelia reclining in her sleeping bag, reading a book by the light of a book lamp. Taking a moment,

he said a quick prayer before stripping down to his boxers. He shivered slightly against the chill March air, and slid into his sleeping bag. Propping himself up on one elbow, he watched Amelia silently for a few minutes. Finally, he said to her, "Is there something wrong, honey?"

Amelia laid the book face-down on her stomach and stared up at the tent's ceiling. Without looking at him, she replied, "No, everything's fine, honey. I'm just tired. I'm going to go to sleep." She switched off the lamp and for a while Greg couldn't see anything. He heard her breathing even out as she fell asleep. Later, when his eyes had adjusted to the dark, all he could see was her back.

* * *

Greg's nose was cold.

Opening his eyes, he could hardly see anything in the gloom of early morning. Although still dark, he could see a little of the tent's ceiling despite the sleeping bag drawn tightly around his head for warmth. There was a thin frost on the ceiling, frozen condensation from their breath overnight. He sat up awkwardly, still enmeshed in his cocoon-like sleeping bag. After struggling with the drawstring for a few minutes, Greg was able to escape his sleeping bag. He instantly regretted it as the chill of a March morning caressed his skin. Shivering, he pulled on some warm clothes and his boots, then glanced at his illuminated watch. Quarter to six; he still had time to make breakfast before waking everyone else up for their early morning hike.

Unlike some people, Greg was a morning person. He hated sleeping late, and was usually awake by six in the morning. He woke up even earlier when camping, due to the sound of the trees and the animals making their own little noises. Although he lived in the city of Rochester, he preferred the countryside of Western New York. The city was too bright, too busy. Greg valued every moment he spent in the park, and although it was just fifteen minutes by car south of the city, it seemed like it was thousands of miles away from the buses, the drunks, and the shootings. In the woods, next to the glacial ponds, Greg felt at peace. The river campus where he worked was removed from the city, but you still knew that the city was right next door.

Struggling out of the tent, Greg walked quietly over to Iris's pup tent and found her sleeping quietly, tucked snugly into her sleeping bag. A spray of black hair had escaped her sleeping bag, bringing a smile to Greg's face. Closing the flap, he fired up their small stove and boiled enough water for a mug of hot chocolate. He sat on a log as he waited, going over his plans for the hike in his mind. After a few minutes, the water was hot and he made his chocolate. Greg left his family a note, grabbed his hot chocolate, and went for a walk around the pond. His wife and daughter weren't early birds like him, and they wouldn't wake up for a while yet. While they slept, Greg planned on enjoying a sunrise in peace and quiet.

All the ponds in the park were surrounded by trails and horse paths that ran along the edge of the water, each a dozen feet wide. Reeds grew along the banks, providing homes for the countless types of animals that lived in safety in the park. Although most of the birds were still in the South for the winter, there were still many inhabitants in the park. Greg could see a dozen different types of animal tracks in the half-frozen mud of the bank.

After a short while had passed, Greg heard the snort of a horse up the trail. Coming around a bend, he saw a beautiful chestnut stallion drinking from the edge of the pond. The marvelous creature appeared to be nearly eighteen hands tall. Oddly, the horse had no bridle or saddle, or any other trappings he could see. Greg didn't see any people around at first, but then he spied a small, white hand resting on the horse's black mane. He approached the pair carefully, not wanting to startle the horse. The animal's ears twitched and it raised its head, looking straight at Greg with a look that could only be called disdainful. The giant stallion almost seemed to be saying that Greg was foolish to think he could scare the animal. Then owner of the hand stepped around the horse, coming fully into view. She was slightly built and perhaps a few inches shorter than Greg's own five-foot-eight height. She was dressed in a fleece jacket, jeans, and some of those new synthetic hiking boots valued for their light weight.

The woman smiled sunnily, shaking her golden hair out of her eyes. "Good morning! Here to see the sunrise, are we?"

Greg smiled in return and walked up to the stallion, reaching out to smooth his mane with one hand. Looking to the woman, he said, "Good morning to you too. Yeah, I love the sunrise here and make a point of watching it whenever I'm here camping. It's not the same up in Rochester." Greg stuck out his hand, "My name's Greg Shelley, it's nice to meet you...?"

She smiled and shook his hand firmly. "Tatiana Reynard. So you're here camping, huh? You're pretty lucky, the park doesn't usually allow campers here."

Greg smiled, "True, but I've got a friend in the park service that makes an exception for me. We go way back, and he knows I won't create any trouble, so he lets my family and I camp here a few times a year." Changing the subject, he ran a hand down the stallion's back. "You've got a beautiful horse here. What's his name?"

"I don't know, I haven't named him. He doesn't belong to me, he just lets me ride him in return for some hay and a nice warm place to sleep," Tatiana said, smiling. "And so far he hasn't told me what his name is."

Greg laughed. "He looks like a Thunder to me, but I'm not a big horse aficionado."

She paused for a moment before asking, "So, where's your family?"

Waving his hand in dismissal, Greg said, "They're still sleeping, they aren't early birds like I am. They'll probably be sleeping for quite a while yet. For some reason both of them need about ten hours of sleep. The thought of sleeping that long and missing out on that much drives me crazy."

"I know what you mean," Tatiana said, nodding in agreement. "I'm usually up before the sun and don't go to bed until well after night falls."

Glancing back towards his campsite, Greg said, "I hate to be rude, but I must get going if I'm going to make it all the way around the pond before my family wakes up. If you want, you are welcome to walk with me. Mr. Ed can come along too," he said with a grin.

"I'd be happy to walk with you, Greg. Can you tell me what time it is, though? I forgot my watch at my house," she said with a sheepish grin.

"Sure," he said, glancing at his watch. "It's six on the dot. I figure that Amelia will wake up at about seven, so we should have enough time."

"Okay, let's get going then." She patted the stallion on his strong shoulder and said, "C'mon, no more resting for you. It's time to get moving again." He snorted and raised his head, backing away from the water to give Tatiana room to mount. She sprang gracefully up to his back, an impressive feat since he didn't have any stirrups. She didn't even use his mane.

With a click of her tongue, the stallion moved off at a slow trot so that Greg would be able to easily keep up. They had traveled only a few dozen yards when the predawn gloom became the black ink of the darkest night.

The stallion reared, neighing loudly. With a practiced hand, Tatiana maintained her seat and tried to calm him down. Greg stumbled backwards, away from the violent motion of the crazed equine. Tripping backwards over a root, he landed on back, looking up at the darkest sky he had ever seen. There were no stars, no glow on the horizon of the approaching dawn, nothing. The only thing he could see was a slight glow to the north where Rochester was.

Greg had gone spelunking once when he was in college. They had explored this one particular cave, heading deep down into its depths. Over an hour after they began, Greg had been left alone for a few minutes while his friends had gone ahead to check out some stalactites. He had been worried when he couldn't see the glow of their lights, and he stood up quickly, cracking his headlamp against a rock by accident. His light had flickered and then died. All of a sudden, it had been pitch black. He had never seen a night so dark, there in that cavern underground where sunlight had never shined. It was exactly the same, there in the park, when the stars went out. He couldn't see a thing.

Fear paralyzed him for a long moment, his mind refusing to comprehend what his eyes were telling him. After an interminable time, he was jerked back to awareness by Tatiana's voice. Looking around dazedly, Greg saw that she had regained control of the stallion and that she was now leaning over him, asking him if he was hurt.

He sat up and shook his head, trying to clear it, and replied tersely, "Yeah, yeah... I'm okay." Greg glanced up at the terrifyingly black sky and then back to Tatiana's more comfortable face. "But what happened? What's going on?"

Tatiana replied, "I don't know, Greg." He searched her face carefully; there had been a slight pause before her answer and a quiver to her voice. "We'd better get back to your camp, though, and check on your family. If they wake up any time soon, they'll probably be really scared." Greg thought she knew more than she was telling him. Despite her strange tone, she didn't seem to be overly worried. "Why don't you jump up here with me, he can easily carry both of us." Greg nodded, and eyed the horse carefully. He had done some riding as a child, but he was far from an expert. Seeing his hesitation, Tatiana reached down to give him a hand up. Although he was dubious as to whether a woman as slight as she could lift him, her grip was surprisingly strong and she helped him up without any apparent difficulty.

The pair set off at a trot towards Greg's campsite, the whole while trying not to look at the sky. Even so, Greg couldn't help but look up every few moments. The sky was, for lack of a

better word, unnatural. Whenever he looked at its inky blackness, it felt like someone was walking over his grave. He tried not to think about it, but it kept drawing him back.

As they approached within a hundred yards of the campsite, they both heard a scream.

Greg had never heard anything like it, not when Amelia was in labor with Iris, not when he was in a traffic accident and his friend's leg had been crushed by the other car. It was a bestial howl, a cry full of pain, sorrow, and hatred. It made his hair stand on end and it made the horse rear, dumping him to the ground. He barely registered his fall, because he recognized the voice, although barely. It was Amelia.

Greg was on his feet as the second scream rang out, this one as terrible as the last. Perhaps more so. He raced towards the campsite, his legs moving incredibly slowly. He could hear Tatiana behind him, screaming for him to stop. He didn't listen. He just kept running, the yards passing impossibly slowly.

Eons and seven howls later, Greg reached his campsite. The screams had stopped. He pulled out a flashlight and shined it around the campsite. It stopped upon the pile of cloth that was once Iris's tent. It lay torn upon the ground, its poles snapped and its stakes pulled up. A small white hand, stained with blood, protruded limply from its door. With an anguished cry, he rushed to her side and threw himself down beside her, his hands reaching out to comfort her. His light shone upon her face, revealing terrible gashes covering her body and a deadly crimson smile drawn across her neck. He froze, unable to move, unable to comprehend the death of his child. The death of the light of his life.

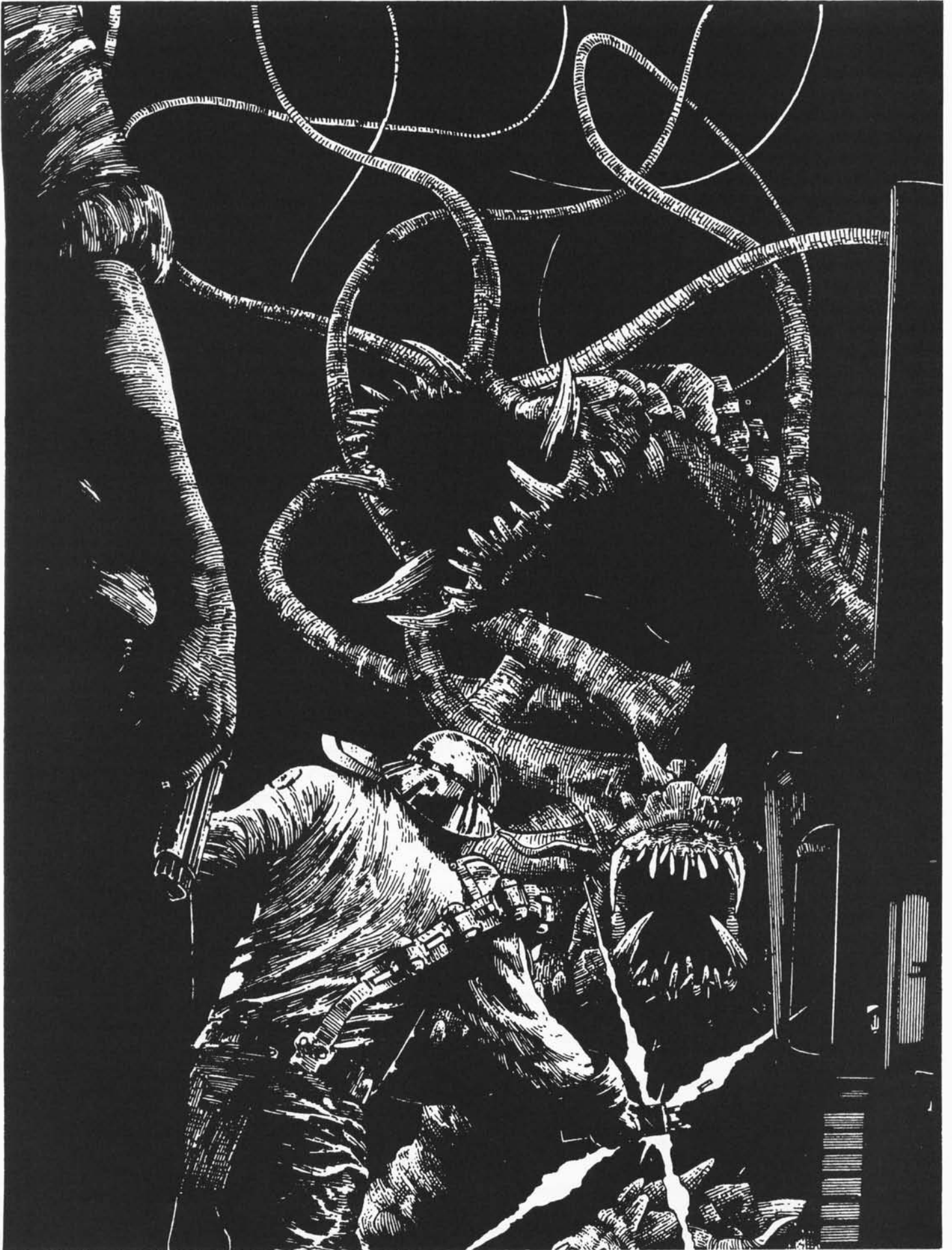
As he knelt there, a tearing sound pushed its way into his mind. Greg turned slowly, shining his light towards where his and Amelia's tent had stood. He saw a gaping hole torn into its side. Protruding from it was something that could only be called a monstrosity.

A huge, fleshy body lay partly outside the tent. Tentacles protruded from its trunk, reaching into the tent. Nearly eight feet of worm-like flesh lay outside the tent, and Greg couldn't tell how much on the inside. It was making the tearing sound. A tentacle withdrew from the tent, covered in blood. It wiped itself on the fabric of the tent and then disappeared back inside. A quiet moaning was coming from inside the tent.

True fear pervaded Greg's body, pushing thoughts of Iris out of his head. This was not the fear of death, or a phobia of heights. This was true, primeval fear. This was the fear of the hunted for the hunter, of the lamb for the wolf. Another instinct surfaced, that of survival. He was cornered in this campsite. No matter how fast he could run, he simply knew that he could not escape the terror feasting in his tent. Like the cornered dog, he attacked.

Greg slowly reached out one trembling hand and picked up one of the metal stakes from Iris's tent. It was an old stake, twelve inches of shining stainless steel with a sharpened point to penetrate the hardest dirt. Or the toughest hide. Greg slowly crept up behind the creature, stake held in hand like a knife. As he heard another moan, Greg blindly stabbed the stake towards the creature's maggot-like flesh. It sank in nearly eight inches, sliding smoothly through the boneless flesh.

The creature screamed as its body flailed in pain. It whipped around like a snake, revealing a gaping maw full of needle teeth



and four large fangs, all covered in blood. Greg fell back in horror, jabbing blindly with the steel shiv as he began to pray. "Into thy hands, O Lord-" A tentacle whipped out and captured his wrist, cutting off his prayer as it crushed the bones and forced him to drop the blade. A scream escaped his throat, quickly cut off by another tentacle wrapping itself around his neck. His neck muscles tightened futilely against the preternatural strength of the creature as it drew his head back. The sky filled his vision as his throat was bared. The rough tentacle tightened further, cutting off his air and making his vision swim. Greg's terror mounted to new heights as he heard the creature move outside of his line of vision.

The monster's jaws shot forward, propelled by several hundred pounds of mystic muscle, its maw gaping wide. Greg felt an impact against his chest, quickly followed by pain beyond comprehension. His entire body went numb and his vision became washed red. Conscious thought mercifully left him.

Chapter 2 – *Reveni*

He ached.

Cracking open dry eyes, Greg was blinded by a searing white light that burnt straight to the rear of his head and then exploded, leaving him writhing in pain.

Greg tried to reach for the reassuring weight of the crucifix he always wore around his neck, but his arms felt like lead weights. He was so weak he could barely move them, hardly able to twitch his hand. A groan escaped his lips as he squinted against the bright light, allowing his eyes to adjust. After a few minutes he felt the life returning to his limbs as the pain retreated a few paces, just waiting to pounce again. Greg sat up slowly as the world spun around him, making him press his hands against his throbbing temples and try to will his headache to go away. Failing in that, he took a deep breath and looked around in confusion, attempting to figure out what was going on. Greg had no recollection of past events, of why he was in such pain, or of where he was.

Greg was sitting on a couch in a nicely decorated room that was brightly lit. It was not what he was expecting. The couch was soft and relatively nice, albeit a few years out of fashion. The floor was covered in oriental rugs with patches of burnished hardwood showing through. The walls were white plaster hung with expensive looking paintings and tapestries, in addition to shelves upon shelves of books. The room had a high, vaulted ceiling, at least twelve feet tall. A huge globe stood in the corner, brown with age. As he continued to survey the room, his eyes came upon a large window. The window ran from floor to ceiling and had a seat built into the base. Sitting at the window was a woman Greg knew. It was Tatiana, the woman from the park.

As Greg remembered Tatiana, the events in the park came back to him. Of meeting the woman and her horse, of the strange sky, of returning to the campsite to find his family dead and dying, and of his death at the hands of a nightmarish creature. His mind recoiled at the last. Of his death...

Greg focused his overworked attention on Tatiana, and croaked out, "What happened?" As he glanced out the window, he saw it was still dark. However, recent events had shown him that simply because it was dark, that didn't mean it was night.

Tatiana turned from where she was looking out of the rain-splashed window to where Greg was sitting up on the couch. A pleasant smile split her face. "Oh, you're awake. I was wondering when you would be getting up." She ignored his question as she continued, "How are you feeling? You still look pretty beat up."

"Huh? Wha-" Greg's mind tied itself in knots trying to keep track of everything. He pushed it all aside and repeated his question. With as much force as he could muster, he asked her again, "What happened, Tatiana?"

She frowned slightly, then sighed. "You died, Greg. That Ashmedai - the monster - nearly bit you in half." Greg's face drained of all color as she said that. She proceeded, "I'm sorry to tell you so bluntly, but it's the truth. I had wanted to give you some time." She quickly added, "But you're okay now, you're alive and healthy."

In shock, Greg whispered, "And Iris? Amelia?"

Tatiana's gaze fell. "I'm sorry, Greg. By the time I reached you it was too late for them." She paused, "I was barely able to save you and bring you here, Greg."

Comprehension didn't come easily to Greg as he tried to grasp what she was telling him. "So... you're saying I died? And that you brought me back to life?" She nodded affirmatively. "Are... are you an angel, then?"

Tatiana smiled, with a hint of amusement. "No, Greg, I'm not an angel." She paused.

"I'm a faerie."

Greg laughed out loud, the chortle turning midway into a gasping wheeze. After catching his breath, he said sarcastically, "A fairy? Are you kidding me? Where's your little green suit or gossamer wings, then?"

"Not a fairy, Greg, a *faerie*." Greg could almost hear the spelling in her voice. "My name is Titania, Queen of the Fae. I saved you when you were bleeding out your last upon the grass. I brought you here, to my home, to rest."

"But faeries don't exist!"

Tatiana smiled. "And angels do, Greg?"

Greg just muttered under his breath.

She sighed, "Okay, Greg. Here's your proof." She stood up from the window seat and moved closer to Greg, stopping a few paces away. Tatiana raised her arms and began to glow with a bright, white light. Greg raised his hand to shield his eyes as he squinted at her, trying to make sure she didn't use any tricks. She became iridescent and colors ran amok over her skin, shifting constantly like oil on water. Two glowing wings extended from her back, thin membranes that extended and then folded themselves neatly down her spine. The glow slowly lessened and her colors solidified. Tatiana was now a tall, thin woman with starkly pale skin, fair hair, and electric blue eyes. She was garbed in shimmering robes that looked as light as air and did nothing to conceal her lovely form. Protruding from her back were neatly folded... gossamer wings.

Greg realized that his mouth was gaping wide in shock. "Jesus Christ..."

Titania smiled, "Now Greg, that's no way for a good Catholic to talk."

He shook his head in amazement and rubbed his eyes, trying to convince himself that he was hallucinating. Opening his eyes,

he saw that he wasn't. A *faerie*... Suddenly, everything broke down inside of him and he began laughing hysterically. "Did you know either of the Brothers Grimm, Titania?" He continued laughing insanely, and then stopped suddenly as she looked at him sadly with those bright blue eyes. He pulled his knees to his chest and curled up in a ball upon the couch as his mind futilely tried to cope with the realization that his whole reality had just been overturned. Quite possibly all that he had once believed was wrong. Magic was real. The monsters under the bed really could hurt him. The day previous he would have dismissed Titania as a charlatan with some fancy tricks. But the night before, he had died. He had felt the icy kiss of death and the nothingness that followed. He *knew* he had been dead. And now he wasn't. That was magic of the highest order.

Every part of his being stopped, both body and mind. He had died. And there had been *nothing*. No bright white light, no pearly gates. No Heaven.

Greg had been raised a Catholic from the minute he was born. He was baptized, received communion, and if there was one thing he was sure of, it was of God's existence and of Heaven and Hell. He would have doubted the sky was blue and the grass green before he doubted in his religion. Now, he had died and come back to life. Like Jesus. What did that make him?

Turning red-rimmed eyes upon Titania, Greg asked the most important question of his life.

"Titania, does God exist?"

Her regal shoulders dropped a little as she sighed. "Greg, that's not for you to know right now. One such as myself cannot let a mortal know the answer to the ultimate question; you must wait until you have passed on – for good – to find out. If I were to tell you, it would disrupt the natural order of things. Once your service to me has been finished, you will be free to find out if you so wish. But for now, I cannot answer that question."

Greg's face became a mask of rage as he shouted, "You cheated me! I'm supposed to be in Heaven with my family now! You stole that from me when you saved my life! You speak of the natural order of things? I'm supposed to be *dead*! You disrupted the natural order, *you* broke the rules! Not me!" He broke down sobbing again as he whispered in a choked voice, "I'm not supposed to be here."

Titania sat down smoothly on the couch next to him and put her arm around his shoulders. "Greg, I saved your life. Who is to say that *that* was not your Fate? We can only follow the path down which we are led. If we try to do otherwise, that is what disrupts the order of things."

He quieted as she spoke, and then blew his nose on the sleeve of the silk robe he was wearing. He hadn't noticed it before. Drawing a deep breath, Greg looked Titania straight in the eyes. "I won't forgive you for what you did, Titania. But it has been done and I must deal with it." He paused for a moment, thinking. "You mentioned a service to you. What do you expect me to do for you, Fae-Queen? I'm simply a mortal."

With a smile, Titania said, "Actually, I misspoke slightly when I referred to you as mortal earlier. Although you are mortal, you are a little bit more than that now. When I saved your life, I gave you the ability to channel my own power through you. You will never die unless I let you. If you ask, I will grant it and your life will end in an instant. Until that time, however, you will live, no matter how grievous the injury. My life force

will sustain you. Most importantly, I have given you the power to correct imbalances in the world. You have the power to restore the natural order. The Undead, the supernatural, all these creatures are unnatural beings subject to your power. It is your task to cleanse the world of them, Greg." Her voice took on a tone of deadly seriousness. "These are great powers I've given you. I gave them to you because I have studied you for quite some time. I know your mind and I believe you have the wisdom and restraint to use these powers wisely. But remember that I am truly in control of the power. I determine if and when they can be used. If you attempt to use them for something I do not support, they will fail you. They can never be used against me, obviously, nor against those I hold dear. The limits I have placed upon them mean that they can only be used for one purpose: to correct the imbalance. The Ashmedai that killed your family is one such imbalance, Greg. Your first task is to correct this disparity and avenge the death of your family."

Titania sighed and a look of sadness clouded her perfect, yet slightly alien, features. "I too, have lost people dear to me, I understand your loss. However, a covenant binds me so that I may not directly interfere with the affairs of man except in a few limited instances, such as in order to save a life. To affect the world, I must use an intermediary such as yourself." She smiled benignly at Greg. "There are few people capable of being an emissary of the Fae. It takes character, conviction, and strength of will. I believe you have these qualities." The Fae Queen stood up straight and tall, her bearing that of a queen of queens. She fixed her electric blue eyes upon Greg and said in an ageless voice, "So I charge you, Gregor, son of Loriel and Brian, to serve as my hand in the mortal world, to serve me and to help me make the world right again. To stamp out the evil that has invaded our home. To fight, to die, and to rise and fight again until our world is pure. Will you serve me, Gregor?"

Greg was shocked anew. To serve as an emissary of what amounted to the gods? It was insane, but it was happening. Suspicious, he asked, "And what happens to me if I refuse? Do I drop dead on the floor?"

Shaking her head, Titania replied, "No, Greg. I restored you to life and if you refuse to serve me, you will continue to live as if you had never died. I will remove my link to you, leaving you with none of my power, and if you die again, it will be permanent. Greg, remember that as a mortal, you have little chance of avenging your daughter. The Ashmedai is a creature of dark magic and mystic power. I mean no offense, but a simple mortal has almost no chance of defeating an Ashmedai."

The wheels in his head started turning as she spoke. If he became a mortal once more and fought the Ashmedai, he would likely die. But if he destroyed the creature before his own death, he would be free to join his family in Heaven. For he knew deep down that there was a Heaven; he hadn't seen it simply because he hadn't died fully. His mind went back to the attack, and the sight of his daughter's mutilated body invaded his mind as cold rage suffused him. Yes, he would destroy both that creature and himself in the process, restoring the natural order of things. There was no choice in the matter. He would make the creature that killed her suffer like nothing had suffered before. He would exact his vengeance no matter what it took.

Looking up at Titania, he slowly shook his head. "No, Titania, I don't want to serve you. I don't want to save the world."

His voice became more animated as he continued, "I just want to make that creature pay before I die and rejoin my family. If I served you, I would be cheating my fate, and that is not my right."

Titania sighed, then smiled sadly. "I had a feeling you would say that, Greg. I've watched you for years and I know how strong your beliefs are. That's part of the reason why I chose you. I'm also sure that if I don't tell you where the creature is, you'll hunt for it until you die of old age." Greg nodded as she continued, "I'll tell you then, but be careful, Greg. After it killed you, it left your body alone for a short while. During that time, I was able to bring you back to life and transport you here. As I was leaving I saw it heading north, towards the city. It will probably attack every house along the way, so if you just drive up the road towards Rochester, you ought to be able to find it. There's a car out front that you can have. Just be careful; although it is dark, it is still daytime. The roads are a dangerous place full of panicked people."

Greg stood up with a slight groan as his stiff muscles protested. He said to Titania with a look of total seriousness on his face, "Titania, I have to thank you for saving my life and giving me the chance to punish this creature for what he did to my family and myself. Thank you for helping me, and I wish you all the luck in finding an emissary. However, that emissary will not be me, I do not want that type of power." Greg sighed heavily, "And thank you for helping me find it. Hopefully this shall be over soon and I shall be reunited with my family, free to rest in peace." So saying, Greg stood up, turned his back, and walked outside. He found a BMW waiting there, unlocked and with keys in the ignition. He stood, looking at the car for a moment, while the ever-present rain soaked him to the skin. Finally, he opened the car door and sat down in the plush seat. Greg turned the key and heard the engine start up smoothly, then he drove out onto the road, heading north towards the city and towards his killer. As he turned his high beams on, he noticed that the clock read 5:18pm.

It was a dismal day to be out, black as the darkest night and as wet as the bottom of a swamp. The beams of the BMW could barely cut through the pelting rain, so Greg was reduced to following the white line and hoping that he stayed on the road. The wipers didn't help much either. The thought of hitting a deer in this awful weather made Greg laugh inwardly, thinking that with his recent luck, that is exactly what would happen.

As he drove, he could see houses off to either side with their lights on, full of people who were trying to ward away the darkness. Greg could understand their fear perfectly. Reflecting on his objective, he realized that he was afraid of the creature. He thought back to the campsite and the utter devastation it had caused, and it made his bowels tighten and his body tremble. This monster of darkness had already killed him once. He had never felt so helpless before; he had never been totally at the whim of another individual. And he was going back to do it again. Greg shook his head, thinking he was crazy.

Greg continued ruminating as he made his way slowly up the road. As he passed the entrance to the park, he jerked the car suddenly to the right and entered it, heading directly for their campsite. His mind told him not to, but his heart wouldn't let him do anything else.

The headlights of the BMW swept in an arc across the campsite, illuminating trees and rocks before coming to rest on two lumpy bundles of tent fabric. Greg felt his knees go weak as he got out of the car and stepped slowly towards what used to be his tent. Drawing the soggy fabric slowly aside, he saw Amelia's face, locked in an expression of utter pain and terror.

Until that moment, some part of Greg's mind had refused to accept the events that had happened. That rationalistic portion had been trying to convince Greg that everything that had happened was a dream, that there was some other reason that he had ended up at Titania's house. It told him that if he just went back to the campsite, he would find his family there, worried over his absence but alive.

However, seeing Amelia was enough to make even that part of his consciousness quiet, and now he was forced to face reality without anything to protect him from it. No little subconscious tricks to soften the blow, to make him doubt that it happened. All of that had been stripped away, and he was left with one clear, unavoidable, undiluted truth.

His family was dead, and he had been too.

There was absolutely no way to get around it. Seeing the terrible wounds upon Amelia's body, Greg knew that he could not have survived an attack by that creature. There was absolutely no chance whatsoever.

He had died, and by rights, he should have stayed dead. It was not his place, nor Titania's, to disrupt the natural order of things and deny him Heaven. He would destroy the creature, this Ashmedai, and then he would die for good.

Chapter 3 - *Finis*

The rain still hadn't stopped.

Greg was covered head to foot in mud by the time he had finished the grisly and painful task of burying his family. He buried them by the shore of the pond, on a little rise overlooking the water. The ground was still frozen a few feet down, and he was exhausted by the time he had finished. For lack of anything better, he had wrapped their bodies in their sleeping bags and their tents. When he was finished he made a cairn of stones over the graves and said a final prayer.

The entire time he worked, he thought about the fight ahead. He realized that he was not a killer, he had never been a violent person. As a child the bullies had picked on him and he had never fought back. He had never fought back until his family was in danger. The moral dilemma ate at Greg: How could a creature outside the law be brought to justice unless he did it himself? This Ashmedai could not be arrested any more than Frankenstein's monster could. It was up to Greg to bring him to justice. And in this case, justice meant death.

Memories of Greg's youth came back to him as he thought of his father, drunk on hard liquor, coming home late at night and beating the first person he came across. Alcoholism had run in the family, and his father had seemed to revel in it, drinking at all occasions. It was a wonder he was able to hold down a job at all.

Greg's biggest fear had always been violence. After seeing how violent his father could become, he was afraid that if he fought back against the bullies that tormented him, he wouldn't be able to stop himself. He was afraid that he'd become just like

his father, a mean, angry drunk. He would have to put aside that fear if he were to avenge his family. After all, if he died fighting the creature, he wouldn't have to worry about succumbing to violence afterwards. There would not be any afterwards for him.

Greg said a final prayer over their graves before getting back into his car and ruining the driver's seat with mud. He didn't care. He pulled out of the campsite, realizing that he would never return to it again. He headed out of the park and turned back onto the main road to Rochester. Greg scanned the darkness for deer, thinking how ironic it would be if his quest, for lack of a better word, was ended due to a common deer rather than a tentacled, slobbering monster.

After a few minutes of driving, Greg came across the first signs of the monster and the panic it had caused. A farmhouse at the side of the road was ablaze, the door torn from its hinges and the frame heavily gouged, the damage apparent even in the flickering light of the flames. Also apparent were the still and bloody bodies lying upon the lawn in unnatural positions, contorted past the limits of human flesh.

Greg continued up the road, knowing that there was nothing he could do for those people. And the devastation just got worse as he continued. Burnt out homes, piles of corpses, and trails of blood and gore. Seeing how many people the creature had killed, Greg began to doubt that he could even kill the creature. Some of the people it had killed had been armed, and that hadn't saved them.

Truth be told, Greg had little idea how he was going to kill the Ashmedai. He had come up with and discarded a dozen plans, finding all of them lacking. Despite this, he knew that he would kill the creature, he knew that he would exact his revenge.

* * *

Finally.

As Greg had driven around the bend in the road, he had seen an inhuman shape at the side of the road scuttle out of his headlight beams. He slowed, waiting to see if it would show itself. It did, slithering out into the middle of the road and rearing up to nearly eight feet tall. Eight feet of pulsating red flesh, gaping maw, and writhing tentacles. Greg could still feel those boneless limbs wrapping around him, squeezing the life out of him. His mind ignited with rage and hatred at the sight of the creature, the Ashmedai. Rather than swerving, as most people would have done, he hit the accelerator. The needle climbed steadily as he got closer. Undoing his seatbelt, Greg opened the door slightly. Just before impact, he threw the door open and leapt, landing hard. As he hit the dirt at the side of the road, he felt pain explode along his left side. He continued rolling, eyes closed. Pain overwhelmed him as he felt his head glance off something hard and then consciousness mercifully left him.

* * *

Greg's eyes cracked open slowly and he sat up, his vision swimming. His entire body ached, and simply breathing shot

pains through his body. He knew enough about injuries to know that he had broken a half-dozen ribs at least. His left arm hung limply at his side, bloody and broken. Reaching up with his right hand to touch his pounding head, his fingers came away stained red. Greg looked around slowly, trying to find the monster without losing consciousness. After a moment his vision stopped swimming and he saw the creature lying in the center of the road, writhing on the ground. It seemed to have a huge gash in its side, bleeding green ichor onto the pavement. Beyond it, the BMW was laying against a telephone pole, the front end crumpled and burning. He stood slowly, taking a moment to get his balance, and then staggered towards the Ashmedai. Although it didn't seem to have any eyes, it appeared to sense him coming. It crept backwards, away from Greg.

He tried to speak, to express how much he hated the creature, but he couldn't. His rage choked him, prevented him from saying what he felt. The rage gathered in his throat, a ball of poisonous hate, stopping all sound from escaping. He was finally able to force a single word past the hate, the word coming out choked and quiet, barely audible over the crackling of the flame and the blood pounding in his ears.

"Why?" was all he asked. His mind, not stifled by the limitations of flesh, said much more. "Why, what did I do to deserve this? What are you to inflict so much pain upon so many? Do you enjoy the pain of your approaching death? Do you realize who I am? Do you gain pleasure from the death of children?" His words echoed within the confines of his head, unable to escape but no less potent for that.

A cold, chilling voice entered his mind. "You are part of a puny race, human. You exist only to provide amusement for myself and my kin. You are weak, fragile things, easily killed and so quick to surrender. You will provide much entertainment for my masters in the coming years. We are the more powerful; we are the ones destined to rule Earth. It is the order of things."

Although he was not expecting the creature's mind to enter his, he was barely surprised by it. He had seen too much in the past day to be shocked by simple telepathy. He was more surprised by the fact that it was sentient. Greg tried to mask his shock as he replied coldly, "The order of things? Who are you, an unnatural creature who has never seen the light of God, to be telling me of the order of things?"

The Ashmedai's laughing echoed hollowly in Greg's mind, full of cynicism. "The order of God, you mean? I can read enough of your mind, Greg, to know what has happened to you in the past day. After all that you have seen and done, you still believe that the world, the universe, is limited to some order set down by a single being, this god of yours? If so, you're quite narrow-minded, human."

Greg tried to push down his anger at the creature's... the Ashmedai's, words. He realized that this "creature" was more than a simple monster. It was an intelligent being, not a simple killing machine like he had assumed. Greg had been able to come to terms with the thought of killing a mindless creature. He was not sure if he could kill a sentient being, no matter what it had done. It was simply contrary to his nature. "Narrow-minded? You are the thing that is narrow-minded, obsessed with killing and destruction. You may think you see things more broadly than I do, but I think you see things in terms of how hard they would be to destroy. You are the antithesis of life!"

Greg's voice had risen during the exchange, as his anger began to overwhelm him. "You prey on the innocent, killing women and children! I may be narrow-minded, but at least my life was dedicated to something more than destruction! You and the kin you speak of should be slain as St. George slew the dragon! You—" Greg's rage had continued to build as he ranted, and now all the anger and pain of the past twenty-four hours was exploding past his emotional barriers. He was caught up in an emotional maelstrom that overwhelmed his senses and triggered memories blocked away. Memories of his death and resurrection by Titania. Bright lights, incredible pain, and memories of his life with Amelia and Iris. Despite the facade of civilization that pervaded human society, humans were predators, possibly the most versatile and resilient predator in the world. These predatory instincts waged war with the mores instilled by his culture and the love he felt for his daughter and wife. He was deadlocked, his muscles locked and his mind consumed. Then something changed and Greg's predator instincts emerged, melded with a parent's drive to nurture. The instincts of a predator merged with the desire to encourage life.

The Ashmedai had lain unmoving on the ground while Greg raged, its supernatural senses taking everything in. Its side was healing quickly, as the magic that pulsed through its veins quickly knit flesh, fused bone, and repaired cartilage. All unbeknownst to Greg, as his mind tortured him with mental pictures of his dead family. Soon the Ashmedai would be able to destroy the human and return to its work.

Then, as Greg stood quivering in anger and paralyzed by warring instincts, the Ashmedai's psychic senses detected a change in the human. Something had changed, triggered by the mortal's rage and anger. A Fey power suffused him, healing his wounds and granting him power greater than the Ashmedai's. For the first time since it had arrived upon the plane of Earth, the Ashmedai was afraid.

A mystical green energy coalesced around Greg's feet as he stood locked in place by rage. It played warmly across his skin, passing through his clothes without resistance. The Fey light slowly worked its way up his legs, playing about his skin like lightning on a stormy night. As it touched his scrapes and wounds, they ceased their bleeding and closed, revealing unmarked pink skin. Small motes of green light swirled around him in a miniature vortex, spiraling up and around his body until they surrounded him. Greg began to give off a greenish glow, like light seen from beneath a thick canopy of leaves. The green energy continued to arc over his body, and his ribs made popping noises as they healed and were pushed back into place, the pain making him grimace. He screamed in agony as his arm set itself and then healed in an instant, the pain dying as a warm feeling suffused him. The energy reached his head and the last of his wounds closed. A green halo of crackling energy surrounded his brow, lighting up the darkness of the day.

A fearful moan escaped the Ashmedai's maw as it watched Greg heal and grow in power. By now its wounds had healed themselves and rather than fight, its instincts told it to flee. A power beyond its comprehension had lent the human strange

magic, a magic that left a bitter taste in the creature's mouth. It was the magic of the Earth, a power filled with life and light. The Ashmedai was a creature of darkness and death, blood and destruction. It had to escape, to regain its full power so that it could destroy the human another day.

The Ashmedai's form contracted in on itself, reducing in size to that of a large bird. Black wings sprouted from its back and a beak pushed its way out of his face. In the form of a vulture it tried to fly away, springing from the ground and beating its wings furiously to gain altitude and freedom. Beyond thoughts of its own survival, however, was the need to tell its masters of this new player in the game. Perhaps he was only some sort of woods-witch, but the Ashmedai didn't think so. Some Fey and powerful force backed the man, a power perhaps on par with that of the Nightlords. As it flew, it glanced backwards momentarily to see the human with arms upraised. A ball of green energy grew between his palms and he fixed his eyes on the escaping vulture. Eyes whose surface was played with green lightning.

Greg raised his arms above his head, wrists together and palms pointing up. He was now functioning purely by instinct and he could feel the strange energy coursing through his veins, drawn from the earth into his hands. A ball of crackling green energy grew in his palms, increasing in size until it was nearly six inches in diameter. Greg could feel it pulsing with life, a beat matching that of his heart. The sphere flew slowly out of his hands, gaining speed as it followed the vulture. It implacably gained, until it finally reached the carrion bird.

Greg could feel the pulsing of the Ashmedai's black heart as the sphere flew into the creature and fixated on its chest. The orb grew to surround the vulture, and then it began fragmenting. White lines shot across the surface of the orb and it took on the appearance of cracked glass. Small portions of the orb were sucked into the creature and absorbed. The motes of energy were slowly integrated into the vulture and it began pulsating with green light. Greg could see the sphere of life energy take effect as the vulture began growing, its wings shrinking and feathers disappearing. After a few moments, it had regained its true form; a form that was not conducive to flying. The Ashmedai screamed wildly as it plummeted towards Earth and landed in a crumpled heap on the ground.

Marking the spot where the creature had fallen, Greg sank into the ground and sped through the Earth, rising from the soil to stand next to the Ashmedai's broken body. Its tentacles were flailing weakly through the air, and blood dripped from its maw.

Greg knelt upon the Earth and extended his power to encompass the body of the Ashmedai. It rose up from the ground and encased the creature in a shell of green power, holding it in place. Slowly, it began to disassemble the creature bit by bit, absorbing its body and essence into the Earth. Greg spoke as he watched the Ashmedai being absorbed. "Creature, you destroyed my family and shattered my life. It is only through the intercession of one woman that I live to see your end. Despite my hatred for you, I forgive you at the hour of your death. I only wish to end the terror and destruction, to nurture the life of the Earth. And that does not include you or your kind. I will see you and all like you cleansed from this Earth; I will restore the order of things. Rest in peace, never to rise again, Ashmedai."

Greg intensified the field surrounding the Ashmedai and the creature stopped moving, its tentacles falling still. Its muscles relaxed and it began to fade, breaking down into specks of green energy similar to the ones that surrounded Greg. They in turn sank into the ground. Within a few minutes the Ashmedai had disappeared entirely, absorbed into the Earth. The green energy that flickered around Greg slowly dispersed, flowing back down into the soil until none remained.

Pulling his crucifix from beneath his shirt, Greg clasped it between his hands and began to pray. "O Lord Jesus Christ, Who said to Your Apostles, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you," regard not my sins but the faith of Your Church, and deign to give her peace and unity according to Your Will: Who live and reign, God, world without end. Amen." As he opened his eyes, he saw Titania standing before him, once more in the mortal guise of Tatiana with a strange smile on her face.

"You just cleansed the world using powers from myself and the Earth, yet you still pray to your god. Many people would have their faith shaken by what you have seen, Greg."

Greg looked up at her from where he knelt, and ignored her statement, saying quietly, "You used me. You said that I was mortal, and you lied."

Some of Titania's fire returned to Tatiana's eyes as she replied, "You're right. I used you as a conduit so that you could avenge your family's death. Few mortals could fight a creature like the Ashmedai and win. You couldn't have defeated it without my help." Her eyes hardened, "So yes, I did use you. You are my emissary whether you want to be or not, it is your Fate. You may say you don't want to be it, but when you faced the Ashmedai, you reached out for my power with your subconscious. It bonded with you, and your rage was tempered with my need to nurture life. You now have the powers of life at your fingertips. You can heal the sick, make things grow, and restore the balance that has been upset by the Ashmedai's masters, the Nightlords. You cannot destroy but you can correct. That is what you did to the Ashmedai. It was not a natural part of this world, and you made the Earth absorb it into herself to restore the balance. You may serve me, but I serve the Earth and that means that you do as well. Your powers stem from the Earth and make you the antithesis of the unnatural: the Undead, the Were, creatures like the Ashmedai, and other forms of the supernatural."

Anger blazed up within Greg again, pushing aside the feeling of peace that had accompanied the power. "I don't want to serve you! I want to die, to go to Heaven and join my family! You don't have any right to keep me here!"

With a smile, Tatiana said, "I might not have the right, but the Fates do. This is your destiny, Greg. One day, perhaps, you will join your family, but it won't be today. You have work to do, Gregor Shelley. You had better get started, there's a lot for you to do. We shall talk again, soon." With that, Tatiana sank into the Earth and disappeared, leaving no trace of her presence.

Greg held his face in his hands and began to cry, sobs wracking his body. He was still there when the sun rose at 6:02am the next day.

* * *

After I left Greg, I returned to my home in the city of New York to contemplate my next task. I knew that however much Greg hated me and hated what I had done to him, he would change. He would come to understand the good he could do with the new powers and how he could help others in the dark years ahead. That is the reason I chose him, for his ability to adapt and to forgive. Compassion is a trait so many humans lack. Perhaps with it the human race would be able to rid themselves of the yoke of oppression. With the arrival of the Nightlords, dark beings of magic that at one time had been mortal, the human race was in for a period of darkness the likes of which had not been known for millennia.

Despite my first intercession in Greg's life, I have deliberately lost track of him since then. There have been rumors circulating among the underground of a man who seems to control the very forces of life, but none of them have been substantiated. However, I would like to believe that it is Greg and that he is still alive. And that he has forgiven me.



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PALLADIUM

ROLE-PLAYING GAME[®]



The Shrine of Ventax

By Michael Long

An Adventure for The Palladium Fantasy RPG[®]

Introduction

The Shrine of Ventax is a Palladium Fantasy RPG adventure for 4 to 6 players, between 4th and 8th level of experience. This adventure is best suited for a group of good or Unprincipled characters of any race or O.C.C. The Game Master should limit the number of magic items that the adventurers have, and should attempt to limit the number of spell-casters (this does not include the Diabolist or Summoner O.C.C.s) to no more than two. This adventure is set in the borderlands of the Eastern Territory, near the borders of the Old Kingdom.

Game Master Information

War has come to the kingdom of Rhiann. One of her highest lords has allied himself with an evil alien intelligence, known as Gath-Gadriel, or more commonly as the Shadow-Lord. Lord Drenath does not know that his attempt to usurp the throne with Gath-Gadriel's aid, is merely a plot on Gath-Gadriel's part to free himself and return to the land of men, and usher in the return of the Old Ones. Warned by a great Priest of Light, King Galan decides to send his only heir, his daughter Cyrilla, away to the safety of his brother, king of the neighboring realm of Aesland. Sending for the noble Palladin, Valeria Whitesword, the king charges her and a handful of brave Knights to deliver her safely to her uncle, King Talath. Along the way, the Priest of

Light appears and tells them of King Galan and Queen Macha's deaths and defeat. The Priest tells them of the Shrine of Ventax, where lies a magical gemstone which has the powerful essence of the God of Light, Ventax, within it. The stone, he tells them, has the power to thwart the plots of Gath-Gadriel and to turn his unholy army to dust. Without aid from the armies of darkness, Lord Drenath will fall easily to the warriors of Aesland and the surviving soldiers of Rhiann, and Cyrilla can reclaim the throne once more.

This adventure is designed to draw the characters in without their foreknowledge. As the adventure begins the characters are merely traveling through the snowy mountains, when they are struck by a fierce blizzard. They are forced to seek shelter from the icy storm, that's when they stumble across the path of the Princess and her guardians; they find a bloodied, ransacked farmhouse, which sets the stage as their curiosity is aroused by this mystery.

The Game Master should read or paraphrase each *italicized* section of text aloud to the players at the appropriate times.

Prologue

Your brave party of adventurers have decided to head southward in search of warmer and more civilized lands. You are able to make your way through the high mountain passes before they become snow-bound. On the other side of the mountains is a great snow-covered forest. Wending your way through the pines, you notice that the snow is beginning to fall more heavily, and after some time it has developed into a full-fledged blizzard.

For hours your party is beaten and battered by the stinging ice, snow and bone-numbing winds. As night falls, and the temperatures as well, all hope begins to fade. Suddenly, out of the murky twilight a dark structure appears in the distance.

The blizzard has now become very dangerous for the players and any hesitation will prove deadly. For every five rounds that the players hesitate, they will receive 1D4 S.D.C. damage from exposure, and temporarily lose one point from their P.S., P.P. and P.E., and in addition all skills are at -30%. Any character with Nightvision will find that it is only 25% effective, and normal vision is reduced to less than 100 feet (30.5 m). It will take the party 1D6 rounds to make their way to the Farmhouse.

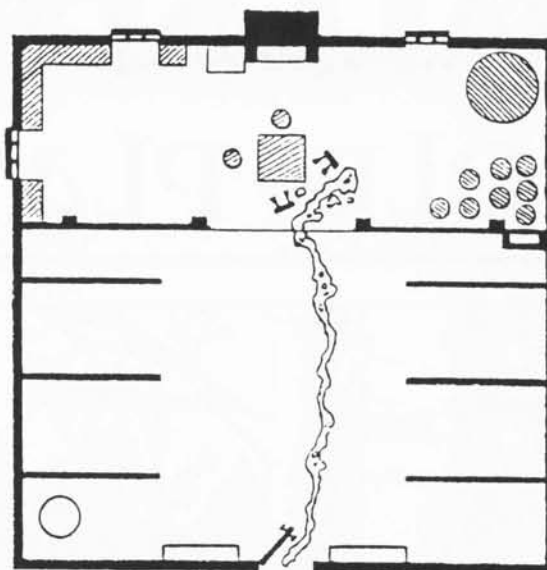
Chapter I

— The Abandoned Farmhouse

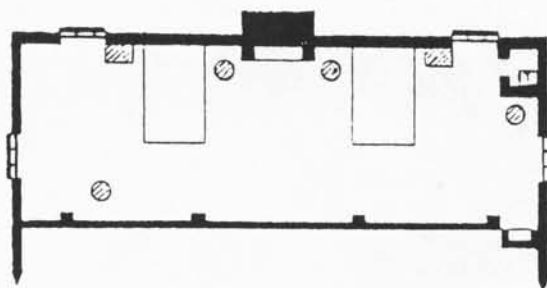
Appearing out of the gloom is a small, two-story farmhouse, its windows locked and shuttered tightly against the storm. Faint light spills outwards from a broken door, standing slightly ajar. Near the doorway you notice a smeared trail of blood leading into the house; all signs of blood outside have been covered up long ago by the snow.

Inside the house, you see no signs of the occupants. The trail of blood crosses the room to two overturned stools near a wooden table in the rear of the house. The front section of the house contains six straw-filled animal pens, each of which is now empty. On each side of the front door are wooden water troughs, filled with frigid water. To the left, in the corner is a small well with a bucket sitting nearby.

Map I -- The Abandoned Farmhouse



Ground Floor



Upper Floor -- Loft

40 feet (12.2 m)

Directly ahead, you see four thick, wooden beams which support a loft overhead, which is accessible by means of a wooden ladder. The area beneath the loft is separated from the animal pens by a handrail, and the floor is a foot (.3 m) higher. In the far right corner stands a pile of firewood, while in the left corner and along the left wall is a pantry cabinet and a cupboard. In the center of the far wall is a faintly burning fireplace, and to the left of the stone mantle is a small iron stove with a kettle of stew on top of it (now cool). Near the woodpile are eight wooden barrels, and in front of the fire is a table with four wooden stools surrounding it (two of which are overturned and lay in a pool of blood).

The loft overlooks the animal pens below, and has another wooden handrail. To each side of the fireplace are two large, straw-filled beds. Near the beds are small wooden tables, and at each end of the chamber is a wooden stool. A small closet stands in the far right corner of the room.

The Game Master should use Map I for this encounter. A careful search of the house will reveal no hidden doors, traps, or even the missing bodies, however the characters will discover a small wooden chest inside the closet. It is filled with miscellaneous clothing, but a small leather bag in its bottom contains 10 gold in various coins. The characters are able to discover enough food to feed their party for two days travel. Of the barrels, four hold fresh water, two contain flour, one holds ale, and one contains dried meats.

If the players examine the bloody trail closely, they will notice the tracks of several large, monstrous creatures smeared in the blood, and can estimate that the attack occurred within the past twelve hours. The blizzard lasts through the remainder of the night, finally ending by mid-morning the following day.

Chapter II

— Another Ravaged Farmhouse

By mid-morning the blizzard has blown itself out, although light snow continues to drift down. In the sunlight your party spots a forest trail leading in the general direction you were heading. Travel is slowed by the deep snow, and after three hours of wading through the cold snow you spot another ravaged farmhouse.

This one is in far worse condition than the previous one. The inside of the house is similar in appearance to the other one, however there are no signs of the monster tracks or blood inside the house or outside either.



There is nothing of any worth or value to be found by the players. It is quite apparent that the house has been searched and ransacked, and there are the unmistakable signs of a struggle.

Chapter III — The Fallen Palladin

Several hours later you see smoke drifting upwards some distance away, and after several more hours of travel your party sees the smoldering ruins of yet another farmhouse. The building has already collapsed upon itself and you see several blackened corpses in the debris. A little distance away you see the signs of a fierce battle; on the bloodied and trampled snow lay six huge, dead Tuskers. In their midst lay a dead Palladin with bloody and dented armor and a great two-handed sword clutched in a death grip. A dagger is lodged in the throat of one of these huge beasts and a war-axe stands in the cloven skull of yet another.

Upon removing the Palladin's helmet, the characters reveal the beautiful face of a young woman with long golden hair, tied back into a single braid. Her face is pale blue and her gray eyes stare blankly into the sky.

In a small pouch on her belt are 65 gold in coins. In yet another pouch is a potion of Healing. Her plate and chain armor is of excellent workmanship (A.R. 17, 175 S.D.C. and weighs 30 lbs/13.5 kg), her sword is a finely crafted two-handed sword (+1 to strike, parry and damage, and it never dulls), and her axe and dagger are engraved with silver (making them effective against undead and supernatural monsters), and are also well balanced for throwing (+2 to strike when thrown).

A careful search of the body will reveal two other items of importance; they are:

1) **A Holy Rune Orb:** This is a silvery orb on a necklace, inscribed with the rune of good, and will only work for a character of a good alignment. It has the following powers:

- Indestructible; Principled alignment.
- Confers a bonus of +2 to their wearer's A.R., and +3 to all saving throws which involve magic.
- Heals 2D6 S.D.C./Hit Points per 24 hour period.
- Will *empathically* warn the wearer of any evil within a 500 foot (152.4 m) radius.
- Has the power to keep all forms of undead at bay, indefinitely.
- Spell Magic: Can cast the following spells once each per 24 hour period; Call lightning, Dispel Magic Barriers, Invulnerability, and Negate Magic. Equal to a 10th level spell-caster.

2) **A message from King Galan of Rhiann:** The message is found rolled up in a leather scroll-case; it reads:

"Lady Valeria Whitesword, Palladin of the Kingdom of Rhiann, Champion and Defender of the Royal House of Bri-Liath.

"It is as I had feared! Lord Drenath of the House of Morfhesa has began an uprising, he has allied himself with an evil mage and an army of the dead, an army which our greatest Priests can not turn away! Recently a great and mysterious Priest of Light came and gave us warning — the evil is more diabolic than just a common usurper. If Drenath wins his dark allies will summon back the Old Ones! I can not allow this to

happen; we shall go forth to fight against this unholy threat, and we shall surely fall but we shall make our final stand count! Now to the point of your summons, I need you to escort our only heir, my daughter Cyrilla, to the safety of Aesland where my brother Talath reigns as King. All hope could be lost if we should fall, that is why she must survive! To aid you on this quest I have assembled my most trusted Knights and bodyguards, they will lay down their lives willingly for their Princess. The way shall be dangerous and I have no doubt that you shall be hotly pursued by the foe. Now I must close, we prepare for the coming battle. May the gods watch over you and keep you safe on this quest; guard well your niece, my young sister. Go with my love and respect.

"Signed and sealed in the Royal Caer of Dun-Sinnain, by our hand, Galan Bri-Liath, King of Rhiann, and Macha, Queen of Rhiann."

The characters should receive at least 100 experience points if they give the noble Palladin a proper burial or funeral pyre.

Chapter IV — Night Riders

For the next several days your party continues down the trail, encountering nothing along the way. One night, your party finally calls a halt and sets up camp in the forest.

During the night-watch (around 2 a.m.), the character(s) on watch begins to detect the sounds of movement, the neighing of horses and the faint creaking of leather and the jingle of arms and armor. The player wearing the holy rune-orb will be awakened by its silent but strong warning.

In the distance you see a large band of horsemen silhouetted against the moonlit night sky. Dark, shadowy monsters roam the edges of the group, and at the head of the company strides a shadowy and mysterious giant dressed in dark robes, its face concealed by a hooded cowl.

As long as the players remain silent and hidden, they are in no great danger of being discovered. However, if the characters are found or they give their position away, they will soon be captured by the 250 horsemen (they are led by a Fiend and they have 10 Tuskers in their company). If the players are captured they will be taken to the dungeons of the Troll Gorm Steeltooth (Chapter VI, Room 9).

As the riders pass by, you hear one of them bitterly complaining to his comrades; he says, "Here we are freezing our butts off lookin' for Galan's whelp, and what do we have to show for our troubles 'cept for a sore backside? Not a bloody thing, that's what! First time we found 'em those four Knights kill fifteen of our men! Then we came across that Palladin and she killed eight more men, and even managed to slay six of those Tuskers before we could bring her down! Then we find 'em again, this time we manage to capture some of 'em, with the help of Gorm, that Troll brigand and his pack of Ogres and Orcs. We end up doin' most of the fighting and then Lord Drenath gives the prisoners to the Troll as a war-prize!"

One of his companions simply responds, "I saw Gorm Steeltooth, and I don't plan on makin' him mad so long as I can help it."

The complainer continues, "Well, umm, er, right. I hadn't thought about that, he is an awfully big bugger isn't he? Ya know what really bites me though? The Princess still managed to escape with that archer!"

As they fade into the distance you hear someone tell the man, "Quit yer complainin' and keep movin'!"



Chapter V — Chaos at the Cliffs

In the morning your party begins to enter tree-covered foothills. Suddenly you are attacked by a pack of Tuskers, which leap out from the trees and drive you towards a cliff-wall.

Fortunately, the wall offers some protection from the beasts, but every three rounds 10 additional Tuskers will arrive and press their attack. The players are driven back towards a hidden cave entrance.

Tuskers (10): A.R. 6, H.P.: 45 each (each pack leader has 70), S.D.C.: 50 each (pack leaders have 100 each), each has 3 attacks per melee round; their bite inflicts 2D6+4 damage, their headbutt does 2D4 damage and their claws do 2D6+15 damage. They are +1 to initiative, +2 to strike, parry and dodge, and are immune to the effects of Horror Factor. They have Nightvision 30 feet (9.1 m), Spd 30, track by smell 48%, climb 40%, swim 40%, can leap 6 feet (1.8 m) high or 30 feet (9.1 m) long. They have a combined Horror Factor of 16.

An odd-looking white stone draws your attention to it, it is at eye-level on the cliff's wall. As you begin to examine it you notice that there is a depression on it roughly the shape of a hand.

If one of the players presses the stone, a large boulder will rumble aside and reveal a passageway lit by torches.

As you touch the stone a rumbling sound can be heard as a huge stone rolls aside and reveals a torchlit passageway. As you stare down the tunnel, the Tuskers renew their savage attack!

Fortunately, the cave mouth is only wide enough for the monsters to attack the party one at a time.

In this small cavern you spot another white stone near the entryway, identical to the one on the cliff-wall.

If the players press the white stone in this chamber it will cause the huge stone to roll back into place, closing the entrance off from the outside and the snarling Tuskers.

Chapter VI — The Lair of Gorm Steeltooth

The Game Master should use Map II for this encounter. The cave complex is the home of the Orc and Ogre raiders of the Troll-Chief, Gorm Steeltooth. The tunnels are well-lit, with torches at intervals of every 20 feet (6.1 m) or so. An adequate source of fresh water can be found in room #11, where an underground spring is located. The complex is fairly small, and guards are very rarely seen in the tunnels. However, there is a 10% chance for every five rounds that the players will encounter an Orc traveling between rooms. The tunnels are filled with the foul smells of unwashed filth and rot.

Empty Cavern (Room 1)

This small cavern contains the now sealed entryway (which will not open for the characters from the inside without a key), and the strange white stone. There is nothing else of any interest or value to be found here.

Latrines (Room 2)

As you round the corner of the tunnel, you begin to notice an extremely foul stench up ahead. As you enter the cavern you finally see what is causing the odor — dung! Piles lay scattered all around the chamber.

There is absolutely nothing of any value in this chamber, it is exactly what it appears to be, a latrine. There is a 30% chance that the chamber is noisily occupied by 1D4 Orcs, who are in no mood or position to fight, although they can alert the others with their shouts.

Guardroom (Room 3)

As your party enters this small cavern, three Orcs leap up from their small table and quickly grab their weapons. A fire-pit behind them heats the chamber.

Orcs (3): All are first level Soldiers. All wear suits of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20), H.P.: 23, 21 and 20, S.D.C.: 25, 18 and 15. Each is armed with a halberd (3D6 damage) and a mace (2D6 damage). Each has two attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 1D6+6 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. +1 to roll with impact, +6 damage, and +3 to save vs Horror Factor. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and can track a blood scent up to 1,000 feet (305 m) away at 20%.

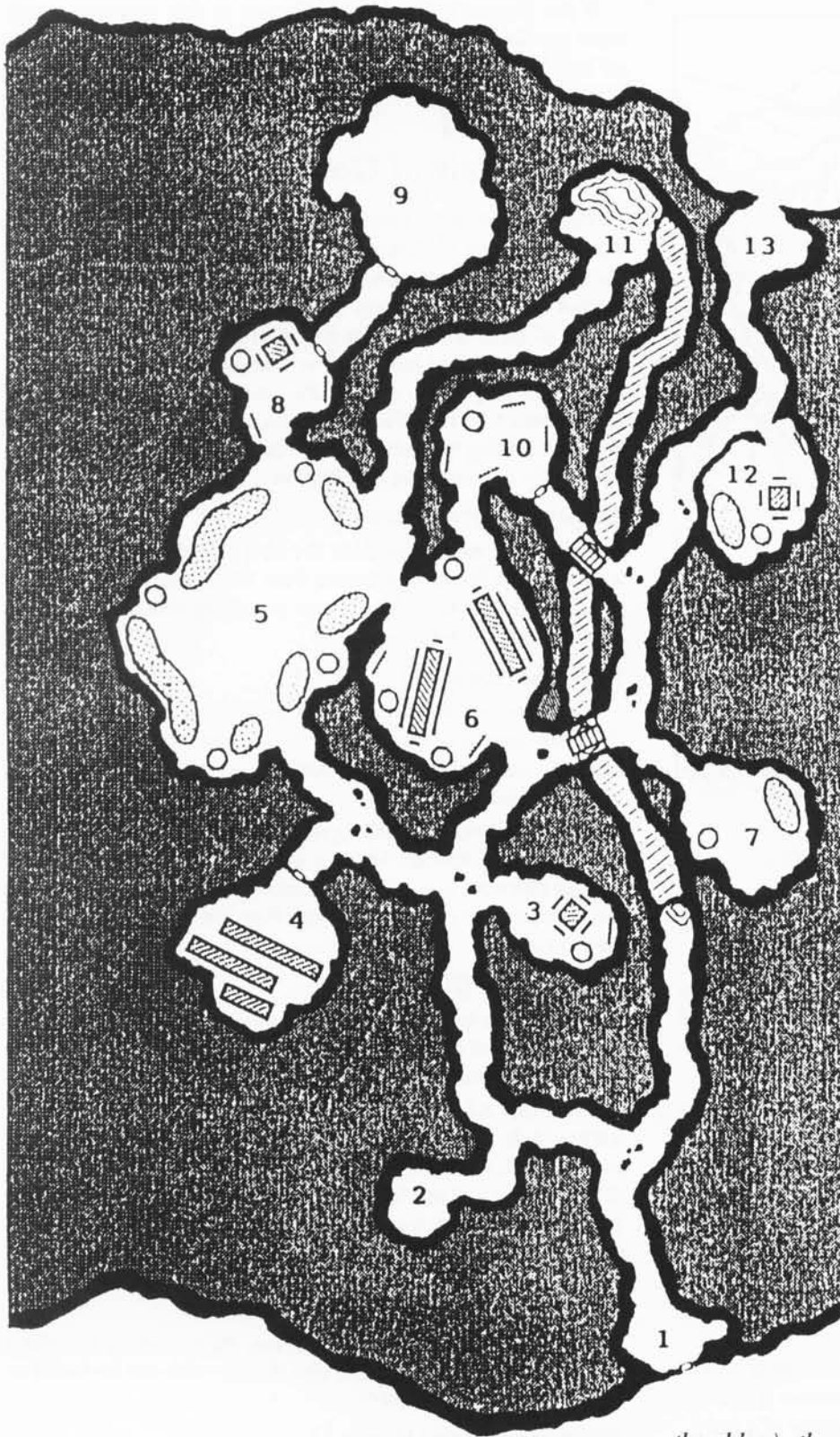
- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 6, 5 and 4 gold, respectively. Nothing else of any value can be found on the Orcs or in the cavern.

Storage Cavern (Room 4)

As you peer into the room, your party can see that nearly half of the chamber is filled with casks and barrels. Most of the barrels lie nearest to the far wall of the cavern.

If the contents of the barrels are examined, the players will discover that 35 contain smoked meats of questionable origin, 20 hold dried fruits and vegetables, 14 are filled with flour, 7 contain a strong but tasty mead, 6 contain a low quality ale/beer

Map II -- The Lair of Gorm Steeltooth



Map Key

-  Tables
-  Long Tables
-  Racks
-  Doors
-  Fire-Pits
-  Bridges
-  Sleeping Furs
-  Crates/Barrels
-  Underground Stream
-  Water
-  Rock/Stone

50 Feet (15.2 m)

mixture, and 2 are filled with a delicious, high quality wine (each of the last two casks is well worth 50 gold!).

Common Room (Room 5)

Up ahead you begin to hear the sounds of voices and activity. You come to the entrance of a large cavern with a high ceiling, filled with a great number of Orcs (mostly females, young and

the elders); they are engaged in their various domestic tasks. Four large fire-pits fill the chamber with their light and warmth. Around these fires, the Orcs have gathered to eat their meals and visit with each other. At the base of the cavern walls, on the ground are many piles of furs which serve the Orcs as sleeping pallets.

There are 20 young Orcs and 12 old Orcs in the cavern, all of which are non-combatants. In addition, there are:



Orc females (32): H.P.: 10 each, S.D.C.: 12 each, all are unarmed and will fight with claw and tooth. Each has one attack per melee round; their claws inflict 1D6+2 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m).

- None of the Orcs have any treasure or valuables. However, among the many piles of furs are two beautiful white bearskins (each is worth 25 gold).

Barracks (Room 6)

Three burning fire-pits light this hall-like cavern. Seated around two long tables are a large number of Orcs and Ogres. They are loudly feasting and drinking, boasting and making crude comments. Their armor and weapons hang upon the weapons racks on the walls, but many still have their daggers at their sides.

Orcs (20): All are first level Soldiers. All are unarmored (A.R. 2, S.D.C. 20 each), H.P.: 19 (x11), 18 (x4) and 16 (x5). Each is armed only with a dagger (1D6 damage) although their halberds (3D6 damage) are nearby (on the weapons rack). Each has two attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 1D6+6 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. +1 to roll with impact, +6 damage, and +3 to save vs Horror Factor. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and can track a blood scent up to 1,000 feet (305 m) away at 20%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 8 gold (x12), 6 gold (x5) and 5 gold (x3). Against the wall are 20 suits of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20) and 20 halberds.

Ogres (10): All are first level Soldiers. All are unarmored (A.R. 2, S.D.C. 35 each), H.P.: 27 (x5) and 25 (x5). Each is armed with a dagger (2D6 damage), although their war-axes (4D6 damage) are nearby (on the weapons rack). Each has two attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D4+8 damage, their kick does 3D6+8 damage, and their bite does 2D4 damage. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +8 damage. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and have a Horror Factor of 10 each.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They each contain 12 gold. Against the wall are 20 battle-axes (Ogre-sized).

Kennels (Room 7)

This cavern contains a blazing fire-pit near the far wall, and nearby the floor is covered with scattered straw. An extremely bored Ogre stands watch over a pack of Gorons (long-legged, lizard-like creatures).

Ogre (1): A second level Soldier. He wears a suit of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20), H.P.: 32, S.D.C.: 36. He is armed with a war-axe (4D6 damage) and a mace & chain (4D6 damage). He has two attacks per melee round; his claws inflict 2D4+10 damage, his kick does 3D6+10 damage, and his bite does 2D4 damage. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +10 damage. He has Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and a Horror Factor of 11.

- He has a belt pouch on his person, containing 25 gold.

Gorons (12): A.R. 12, H.P.: 50 (x2), 45 (x2), 40 (x2), 30 (x2), and 20 (x4), each has three attacks per melee; their claws inflict 1D4 damage and their bite does 2D4 damage, plus there is a 40% chance that the victim of a bite will contract a fever that will last for 1D4 days (Save vs disease: 14 or higher. Victims of the fever are -4 on initiative, reduce the number of attacks, combat bonuses, skills and speed by half.) The Gorons are +2 to initiative, +2 to strike, +3 to dodge, +4 to roll with impact and +4 to save vs Horror Factor. They have Nightvision 600 feet

(183 m), climb 60%/40%, swim 60%, track by smell 40%, and can leap 4 feet (1.2 m) high or lengthwise. They have a Horror Factor of 8 each.

- The Gorons have nothing of any value in their possession, however, each Goron pelt is worth 20 to 35 gold if sold.

There are also 16 Goron hatchlings in the chamber; they are noncombatants and will scatter and scramble for cover if they are attacked. **G.M. Note:** If the players want to capture some of these young Gorons and attempt to train them, it could be a very trying and interesting experience. The young Gorons could very easily get them into serious trouble with their thieving tendencies.

Guardroom (Room 8)

As your party enters this small cavern, five alert Orcs leap up from behind their long table, weapons already in hand. A fire-pit against the wall heats the room, and behind the Orcs on the far wall is an iron yett (a doorway of criss-crossing iron bars).

Orcs (5): All are first level Soldiers. All wear suits of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20), H.P.: 25, 22 (x3) and 20, S.D.C.: 30, 26 (x3) and 25. Each is armed with a halberd (3D6 damage) and a mace (2D6 damage). Each has two attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 1D6+6 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. +1 to roll with impact, +6 damage, and +3 to save vs Horror Factor. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and can track a blood scent up to 1,000 feet (305 m) away at 20%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 12 gold (x2), 9 gold (x2), and 24 gold and an iron key (which will open the yett and the doorway to the dungeon, room 9).

G.M. Note: The iron yett is locked, as is the door to room 9, the dungeon. The key in the leader's belt pouch is needed to unlock these doors; the doors are not trapped.

Dungeon (Room 9)

The cavern is dark, cold and damp. The floor is covered with foul smelling straw and other unsanitary filth. Chains and manacles hang from iron rings set into the walls at various intervals; some hold the skeletal remains of their former occupants. Chained to the far wall is a haggard and worn dwarf dressed in priestly robes, now badly tattered. A dirty bucket of filthy water and a crusty lump of stale bread sit at his side. He looks up as you enter, and newfound hope fills his eyes.

He recounts the tale of his capture. "I am known as Throth Ironhammer. I was once a Priest of the Sacred Mountain. Three months ago Steeltooth and his brigands attacked our holy shrine; slaying all of my brothers, looting it and then burning it down. I was wounded and captured; why I'm still alive I know not! Last night as I slept I had a vision of the Lord of the Mountain. The vision showed me of your quest and that of the Princess, and the great importance of your success. I am prepared to aid you in any way that I can."

Throth Ironhammer: 5th level Dwarven Priest of Light. Principled alignment. I.Q. 18, M.E. 16, M.A. 13, P.S. 23, P.P. 16, P.E. 21, P.B. 14, Spd 12 (5 digging). H.P.: 43, S.D.C.: 25. 3 feet, 8 inches (1.1 m) tall and weighs 140 pounds (63 kg). Three attacks per melee. +2 to roll with impact and save vs Horror Factor, +1 to save vs magic, +3 to dodge and +8 damage.

O.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Healing Touch (2D4 H.P./S.D.C. every three rounds), Exorcism 35%, Nightvision 90 feet (27.4



m), Prayer of Communion 56%, Prayer of Intervention 56%, Prayer of Strength 55%, Remove Curse 35%, Resist Hunger for 15 days and Thirst for 10 days, Resurrection 10%, Turn Dead 45%, Underground Architecture 60%, Underground Sense of Direction 70%, and Underground Tunneling 70%.

Skills: Demon and Monster Lore 65%, Field Armorer 70%, Gemology 70%, Land Navigation 65%, Locate Secret Compartments/Doors 55%, Recognize Weapon Quality 60%, Religious Lore 70%, Speak Dwarven, Goblin and Eastern 98%, Speak Elven 86%, W.P. Blunt (+4 to strike, +5 to parry and +2 to throw), and Wilderness Survival 65%.

Spells: P.P.E. 60, Spell strength: 12. Befuddle (2nd level), Fire-Bolt (4th level), Increase Weight (1st level) and Tongues (6th level).

Armor: None.

Weapons: None.

Armory (Room 10)

This chamber is filled with many wooden racks bristling with a wide variety of weapons and armor. A fire-pit near the far wall lights the room, otherwise the room is unoccupied.

A closer examination of the cavern will reveal the following weapons: 52 spears, 34 halberds, 12 war-axes, 7 daggers, 11 short swords, 28 long swords, 12 Ogre-sized broadswords, 16 Ogre-sized mace & chains, 11 maces.

In addition, the following suits of armor are found: 14 medium-sized shields made of wood and hide (A.R. 5, S.D.C. 10), 17 steel helmets, 7 suits of chain mail armor, 1 suit of Dwarf-sized chain mail (A.R. 9, S.D.C. 20), 4 suits of scale mail (A.R. 15, S.D.C. 75), and 12 suits of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20.)

There are several weapons of excellent quality, they are: 2 spears (Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +2 to damage and +1 to parry and throw), 2 daggers (Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +3 to damage and +1 to throw), 1 war-axe (Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +3 to damage and +1 to parry and throw), and 1 long sword (Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +3 to damage and parry).

Spring (Room 11)

As you enter this cavern you see that a large portion of the chamber is actually a spring-fed pool of cool and fresh water.

The underground stream flows to the collapsed tunnel near room 7. If the players examine the pool closely they will discover that a fine silver-gold ring lies at the bottom of the pool (15 feet/4.6 m deep). It is actually a magical ring, with the following powers:

- Impervious to Fire and Cold (twice per 24 hour period, 1 hour duration each time).
- Diminish self to six inches (.15 m) tall (twice per 24 hour period, 30 minute duration each time).

Gorm Steeltooth's Chambers (Room 12)

You enter a chamber with various skulls lining the walls. Near the far wall, a huge Ogre turns a smoking humanoid over a fire-pit on a spit. A large pile of furs and animal hides lies near the fire, and next to them are two small, iron chests. Seated at a wooden table near the fire is a huge Troll, Gorm Steeltooth. He is eating a roasted arm. He wears his suit of chain mail, his huge war-sword lays on the table top within his reach, and several war-spears lean against the table, also within his reach.

In the far corner of the chamber another huge Ogre stands watch over two nobly-clad women who tend the wounds of a wounded Knight.

(If Throth Ironhammer has not been encountered in the dungeon, room 9, then he will be here as well.)

As soon as Gorm and his guards spot your party, they spring to the attack. Gorm throws the smoking arm in your direction then hefts one of his awesome war-spears.

Ogres (2): Both are 4th level Soldiers. Both wear soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20), H.P.: 44 and 43, S.D.C.: 40 each; they are both armed with battle-axes (4D6 damage). They each have two attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D4+10 damage, their kick does 3D6+10 damage, and their bite does 2D4 damage. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +10 damage. They both have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), and a Horror Factor of 11.

- They each have a belt pouch on their person. One contains 83 gold, the other holds 75 gold.

Gorm Steeltooth: 8th level Troll Mercenary Warrior. Diabolic alignment. I.Q. 15, M.E. 10, M.A. 15, P.S. 30, P.P. 20, P.E. 23, P.B. 10, Spd 11. H.P.: 64, S.D.C.: 55. 12 feet, 5 inches (3.7 m) tall and weighs 537 pounds (244 kg), four attacks per melee; his claws inflict 2D4+15 damage, his kick does 3D6+15 damage and his bite does 2D6 damage. +2 to roll with impact, +5 to strike, parry and dodge, +6 to save vs Horror Factor, Paired Weapons and Disarm attack, Critical Strike on an unmodified roll of 18-20, +15 damage, and Horror Factor 12.

O.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m), climb/scale walls 95% and swim 90%.



Skills: Speak Giant, Goblin and Eastern 98%, W.P. Blunt (+8 to strike and parry and +1 to throw), W.P. Shield (+7 to strike and +8 to parry), W.P. Spear (Master of the spear. +11 to strike and parry, and +3 to throw), W.P. Sword (+8 to strike and parry, and +2 to throw), and Wilderness Survival 80%.

Armor: A suit of chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44).

Weapons: 4 War-spears (4D6 damage), and a Troll-sized war-bastard sword (3D6+2 damage).

- He has a belt pouch at his waist; it holds an iron key (which unlocks every item in the complex that is locked), and 125 gold.

In a pile near the fire-pit lay the dead Knight's belongings. The items include his suit of chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44), his shield and helm, and his claymore (3D6 damage). His clothing and garments lay scattered on the ground; amidst them are a pair of Boots of Mystery (see the **Palladium Fantasy RPG**, page 257) and a well-crafted warhammer (Dwarven; superior strength and balance; +3 to damage and +2 to throw).

Both of the iron chests are locked but do not contain any traps. The first chest contains:

- 2175 gold in various coins
- 4 gems worth 250 gold each
- 5 gems worth 150 gold each
- 13 gems worth 50 gold each

The second chest contains 6 small leather bags, each holding a vast amount of small uncut gems:

- 79 sapphires, each worth 20 gold

- 39 rubies, each worth 30 gold
- 95 emeralds, each worth 25 gold
- 89 garnets, each worth 15 gold
- 71 white pearls, each worth 40 gold
- 51 diamonds, each worth 40 gold

The chest also holds 12 labeled potions, they are:

- 2 potions of Healing (restores 1D6 H.P./or 2D6 S.D.C.)
- 4 potions of Superior Healing (restores 2D6 H.P./or 4D6 S.D.C.)
- 2 potions of Impervious to Cold
- 2 potions of Negate Poison
- 1 potion of Negate Magic Potions
- 1 potion of Love Charm

After the prisoners are freed, read or paraphrase the following section to the players. If Throth Ironhammer is encountered here for the first time, then also read his tale from the Room 9 encounter, in regards to him.

The attractive human woman steps forward and offers their thanks; she begins to recount their capture by Gorm and his brigands.

"I am Ealloine Stormbringer, Warlock and tutor of the royal house of Rhiann. These are my Elven comrades; Sir Eadran Greycloak, a Rhianni Knight, and his sister Endrielle Healtouch, a healer. That poor soul there (she points to the roasting spit) was once my husband, Nidach Longdale." Wiping away her tears, she continues, "Several weeks ago we set out with the Palladin, Valeria Whitesword, on a mission to take our

Princess out of this war-zone to the safety of her uncle. One of our Lords has made an unholy alliance with a great, evil being, in order to usurp our King's throne. Several days ago a great Priest of Light came to us and told us that the King and Queen had fallen and now our Princess was Queen. He also told us of the shrine of Ventax, wherein lies a magic stone which has the power to drive the evil one back to the abyss. The next day we were ambushed, and four of our brave Knights delayed the enemy long enough for us to escape. Days later they found us again, this time it was Valeria who bought us the chance to escape, but alas, it was of no use, we were captured two days later by Gorm's bandits. Eadran was wounded in the conflict and Nidach was slain, Endrielle was captured as she tended her wounded brother. As for myself, my magic kept them occupied for some time but I was captured as my strength finally waned. The Princess was able to escape with her cousin, Nidhir Strongbow. I know him well; he will defend her with his very life, if need be!"

Sir Eadran Greycloak: Seventh level Elven Knight. Principled alignment. I.Q. 21, M.E. 15, M.A. 10, P.S. 16, P.P. 23, P.E. 17, P.B. 26, Spd 15. He wears a bloody and dented suit of plate and chain (A.R. 15, S.D.C. 64) and is unarmed (though he will be quick to claim his fallen comrade's claymore). H.P.: 45 (reduced to 28, due to his wounds), S.D.C.: 23. 6 feet, 3 inches (1.9 m) tall, 170 lbs (76.5 kg). Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m).

Endrielle Healtouch: Third level Elven Psi-Healer. Principled alignment. I.Q. 18, M.E. 17, M.A. 10, P.S. 14, P.P. 24, P.E. 15, P.B. 29, Spd 15. She is unarmed and wears no armor. H.P.: 30, S.D.C.: 15. 6 feet (1.8 m) tall. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m).

Ealloine Stormbringer: 6th level Human Air and Earth Warlock. Principled alignment. I.Q. 21, M.E. 17, M.A. 14, P.S. 13, P.P. 17, P.E. 15, P.B. 22, Spd 15. H.P.: 38, S.D.C.: 16. 5 feet, 9 inches (1.7 m) tall and weighs 138 pounds (63 kg). Three attacks per melee. +2 to strike, +3 to parry and dodge, +2 to save vs Horror Factor (+6 to save vs the Horror Factor of Elementals), +1 to save vs magic, and Critical Strike on an unmodified roll of 19 or 20.

O.C.C. & Natural abilities: Astronomy 65%, can hold her breath for up to 10 minutes, Detect Air Impurities 60%, Holistic Medicine 50%, Identify Plants & Fruits 65%, Recognize all Natural Minerals 75%, Sense Coming Weather 65%, Sense Dangers Within the Ground 60%, Sense Earth Tremors within a 40 mile (64 km) radius, Sense Elementals 55%, Speak with Elementals 92%, Summon Lesser Elemental (Air or Earth) 30% (once per 24 hour period), and Determine Wind Direction and Time 86%.

Skills: Demon & Monster Lore 70%, Faerie Folk Lore 65%, First Aid 65%, Land Navigation 70%, Speak Eastern, Elven and Dwarven 98%, W.P. Blunt (+5 to strike, +6 to parry and +1 to throw), W.P. Staff (+4 to strike, +5 to parry and +1 to throw), and Wilderness Survival 75%.

Spells: P.P.E. 150, Spell strength: 14. Call Lightning (3rd level/Air), Create Light (1st level/Air), Crumble Stone (3rd level/Earth), Dissipate Gases (4th level/Air), Invisibility (4th level/Air), Mend Metal (6th level/Earth), Mist of Death (6th level/Air), Quicksand (4th level/Earth), Rot Wood (1st level/Earth), Rust (4th level/Earth), Silence (2nd level/Air), and Track (2nd level/Earth).

Armor: None.

Weapons: Her quarterstaff (2D6 damage) stands near the fire-pit.

Exit Cavern (Room 13)

This small cavern contains an open cave-mouth, which leads out onto a snow-covered plain. It is now night and the moon shines brightly.

Chapter VII — Captured!

You set off for the higher mountains hoping to catch up with the Princess, your new found allies leading the way. After some time, you begin to hear the sounds of pursuit all around, but you are unable to locate any form of cover to conceal yourselves. Appearing from every direction, horsemen quickly surround your party. Many are men but some are skeletal figures wearing tattered armor. You are hemmed in and are unable to escape. An arrogant looking warrior dressed in a fine suit of plate mail rides forward with a party of soldiers. His men level their crossbows as he appraises your group with contemptuous scorn. They come to a halt only twenty feet (6.1 m) away.

Finally he speaks, "Allow me to introduce myself to those of you who aren't already familiar with me. I am Drenath, of house Morfhessa, Lord of Mynann and King of Rhiann. Tell me where the Princess is at so I can dispose of her and tie up all these loose ends. None can stand before my might, in fact I've just come from crushing the army of King Galan and Queen Macha. They fell, as will all who stand in my path."

Ealloine, Eadran and Endrielle all remain silent, which seems to infuriate Lord Drenath He snarls, "If you won't tell me what I need to know willingly, I guess I need to loosen your tongues for you then, eh?"

With a sharp gesture at one of his men, a soldier rides forth and impales Endrielle from behind. She collapses in a pool of her own blood, silent and unmoving. With a smirk, Drenath asks you, "What do you have to say now? Ha, Ha, Ha!"

*Enraged, Eadran, blood flowing anew from his sudden exertion, flies into a berserker attack, charging Drenath. Two soldiers move to stop him but he slays them in two mighty strokes. The crossbow-men loose their bolts and he is suddenly impaled by dozens of quarrels. He is slowed down but doggedly he continues towards Drenath, mortally wounded. Two more of Drenath's soldiers fall before his sword, and he is struck by another volley of bolts. Now near collapse, he staggers forward to the target of his wrath, **Drenath**, and brings his great sword down, cleaving his shield in half. He is once more stricken by a volley of bolts and finally he sinks down, dead.*

Ealloine cries out in anguish and then begins to call forth her magic; she does two things: First she casts a Mist of Death spell (4D6 damage for those who fail their saving throw vs magic, it lasts one melee round), then she casts a Quicksand spell at Drenath and his guards (30 feet/9.1 m radius, and lasts 1 hour). Throth Ironhammer casts his Increase Weight spell at the remaining horsemen, causing their armor to become much heavier, effectively immobilizing them (lasting 12 minutes). The skeletal warriors are kept at bay by the power of the Holy Rune-Orb. Then Throth begins to pray to his god for aid.

Suddenly a thick cloud of white fog begins to rise from the ground, blocking your party from the soldiers' view. From the mist you hear Throth tell you, "Follow me, my god has heard me. We must be away from here!" Then you see him as the fog parts before him, forming a narrow corridor of escape.

G.M. Note: The fog allows the players an opportunity to escape. However, you may wish to have the prisoners captured, or their actions may make it inevitable. If they are captured, they will be taken back to Gorm's dungeons (chapter VI, Room 9), and will have to figure out some way to escape.

Chapter VIII

— Strongbow and Princess Cyrilla

For the past several days your party has been tracking the Princess with the magical aid of Ealloine. Crossing the snow-covered foothills, you finally reach the edge of a huge pine forest at the foot of the mountains. Taking a few steps further, three arrows embed themselves into the ground inches from your feet. From the trees echoes a strong man's voice, "Hold!



Come no further. Or else you come at peril to your lives! Who are you?"

Ealloine recognizes the voice as that of Nidhir Strongbow. She calls out to him and assures him that your party is no enemy. Once convinced he decides to come out from his place of concealment.

Out from the branches of a tree comes a strongly built man with dark hair and a mustache. He is dressed in studded leather armor, a long sword hangs at his side and a great longbow is slung across his wide shoulders. He gently reaches up to help a beautiful young human woman down. She is dressed in an exquisite suit of shining double mail, and a long sword is sheathed and strapped to her back. She turns and meets your gaze with hardened and fearless green eyes, her auburn hair tied back in a long ponytail, trailing out behind her in the light breeze. Lady Ealloine makes the proper introductions and recounts your past adventures to the Princess and Strongbow. Finally, the Princess nods sadly and says, "I am now the Queen of Rhiann. I knew one day I would be, but I had hoped that it would be under different circumstances. Rhiann must survive! We must make it to this shrine of Ventax and crush Drenath and his dark master, Gath-Gadriel!" She appraises each of you and nods her approval. "Aid me and you will be richly rewarded."

Princess/Queen Cyrilla: Third level Human Knight. Scrupulous alignment. I.Q. 17, M.E. 17, M.A. 21 (trust/intimidate: 70%), P.S. 12, P.P. 17, P.E. 16, P.B. 24 (charm/impress; 65%), Spd 16. H.P.: 32, S.D.C.: 24. 5 feet, 10 inches (1.75 m) tall and weighs 148 pounds (67 kg). Two attacks per melee. +3 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +1 to initiative, and +2 to save vs Horror Factor.

Skills: Detect Ambush 60%, Heraldry 55%/60%, Land Navigation 55%, Military Etiquette 70%, Public Speaking 60%, Sing 70%, Speak Dwarven, Eastern, Elven, and Goblin 98%, Speak Western and Wolfen 86%, W.P. Blunt (+5 to strike and +6 to parry), W.P. Lance (see the **Palladium Fantasy RPG**, page 85), W.P. Shield (+6 to parry), W.P. Sword (+5 to strike and parry), and Wilderness Survival 50%.

Armor: She wears a fine suit of Dwarven-made, *magical Double mail armor* (A.R. 15, S.D.C. 75). It has the following powers:

- It is weightless,
- noiseless,
- and has been magically strengthened.

Weapons: A dagger and a long sword of excellent quality. **Dagger:** Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +1 to strike, parry and damage. It does 1D6+1 damage. **Long Sword:** Dwarven; superior edge and balance; +2 to strike, parry and damage. It does 2D6+2 damage.

Nidhir Strongbow: Eighth level Human Ranger. Scrupulous alignment. I.Q. 13, M.E. 12, M.A. 16, P.S. 20 (hence the name of Strongbow!), P.P. 20, P.E. 17, P.B. 16, Spd 16. H.P.: 52, S.D.C.: 32. 6 feet, 4 inches (1.9 m) tall and weighs 200 pounds (91 kg). Three attacks per melee (six with his longbow), +5 to strike, +6 to parry and dodge, +5 damage; Paired Weapons, Body Throw and Disarm attacks, and Critical Strike on an unmodified roll of 18, 19 or 20.

Skills: Animal Husbandry 85%, Identify Plants and Fruits 80%, Land Navigation 82%, Skin & Prepare Animal Hides

85%, Speak Eastern, Elven, Giant, and Goblin 98%, Track & Trap Animals 80%/90%, Track Humanoids 80%, W.P. Blunt (+8 to strike, +9 to parry and +1 to throw), W.P. Longbow (+9 to strike, +7 to parry, and a range of 800 feet/240 m), W.P. Spear (+9 to strike, +10 to parry and +2 to throw), W.P. Staff (+8 to strike, +9 to parry and +2 to throw), W.P. Sword (+8 to strike, +9 to parry and +2 to throw), and Wilderness Survival 90%.

Armor: He appears to be wearing a suit of normal studded leather, but it is actually magical. It is *Leather of Iron* (A.R. 15, S.D.C. 60).

Weapons: A dagger (1D6 damage) and a long sword (2D6 damage). He also has a well-crafted longbow (Elven; superior strength and pull; +2 to strike and +5 to damage. It does 2D6+5 damage). He has a quiver with 32 arrows still in it.

Chapter IX — The Silver Maiden

You hear the clashing of arms ahead, and in a forest clearing your party sees a beautiful, glowing warrior maiden dressed in shining plate and chain. A shield is on her arm and she wields a flaming sword against her foes. She fights valiantly against eight fearful Ghouls, surrounded and being attacked from all sides, yet she fights on.

Ghouls (8): They are unarmed and wear no armor, but they have a natural A.R. of 12. H.P.: 40 (x3), 38 (x4) and 37, S.D.C.: 20 each. Three attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D6+6 damage, their kick does 3D6+6 damage, and their bite does 2D4 damage. +1 to strike and parry, and on all saving throws, +2 to dodge, +8 to save vs Horror Factor, and +5 damage. Nightvision 300 feet (91.5 m), poor day vision, see the invisible, dig underground, resistant to fire and cold (half-damage), prowl 55%, dimensional teleport 22%, knows all languages, and Bio-Regenerates 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round. Horror Factor of 8.

- They have nothing of any value.

The woman is actually the spirit of Valeria Whitesword. She has returned to offer magical protection from the evil the players will face.

As the battle ends, the warrior turns to your party and says, "My thanks." Cyrilla, Nidhir and Ealloine gasp in surprise, for this is the spirit of Valeria Whitesword, the fallen Palladin. She continues, "I gave my oath to defend you. I am now unable to defend you with my sword, but I've brought you something which will defend you from the unholy evil you will have to face!"

She hands a shining, marble-sized orb to the Princess, and tells her, "This will protect your group from the evil-one's death magic, his power to slay with a word! Sadly, this is the only magic I can offer you; perhaps it will help you. I must go now, my time here is at an end. Farewell Cyrilla, know that your parents and I are watching over you." As she finishes speaking she slowly fades away.

This magical item is known as an **Orb of Life**. They were made thousands of years ago during the Age of a Thousand Magicks, to fight the mighty arcane knowledge being used indiscriminately during that age. It has the following powers:

- All of the characters in the party gain a bonus of +5 to all saving throws against magic.

- It negates all magic which causes instant death, used by or against the party.
- It is indestructible and is not detectable as being magical.
- It will destroy any undead creature touched by the orb, turning them into dust.

Chapter X — The Faerie Path

As you travel onward towards the Shrine of Ventax, you begin to enter an ancient forest of oaks and pines. After a while you start to hear the faint rustle of movement coming from the trees, as well as the sounds of soft chiming bells, which almost sound like tiny voices raised in laughter. Without warning, a group of silvery Faeries comes fluttering gleefully out from the trees.

The Faeries will dart about, playing harmless pranks on the players, and tease them in their musical bell-like voices. At some point they will spot the Orb of Life that Cyrilla is carrying, and at this point they stop in mid-air and hover.

The small silver Faeries pause in mid-air, as they see the Princess holding the Orb of Life. Suddenly, they gleefully exclaim, "It's the light-bringer, the magic one, the one who will set us free from our place of confinement."

One of the Faeries comes forth and introduces himself as Darter. If they are questioned about their phrases regarding the Princess, they will simply state that the Princess is the one destined to break evil's hold on their woods, by destroying the monsters on the path to the Shrine. If they question the Faeries about the Shrine, Darter will offer his services to lead the players to it.

Silver Bell Faeries (14): They are all unarmed and wear no armor, however they have a natural A.R. 6. H.P.: 50 (Darter), 40 (x4), 32 (x7), and 28 (x2), S.D.C.: 18 (Darter), 16 (x4), 14 (x7), and 12 (x2). Three physical or two magical attacks per melee round. +2 to parry and dodge (+4 in the air), +1 to save vs magic, and a Horror Factor of 9.

Skills & Abilities: Fly (Spd 200) and hover, Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Climb/Scale Walls 60%/50%, Dance 94%, Faerie Lore 90%, Identify Plants & Fruits 60%, Land Navigation 82%, Locate Secret Compartments/Doors 54%, Preserve Food 90%, Prowl 92%, See the Invisible, Sense the Location of Ley Lines 80%, Sense the Location of Water 50%, Sing 98%, Speak Elven, Faerie, Giant, and Goblin 98%, Track Animals 32%, W.P. Spear (+1 to strike and +3 to parry) and Wilderness Survival 90%.

Spells: Befuddle (2nd level), Charm (5th level), Faerie's Dance (9th level), Love Charm (8th level), Sense Evil (1st level), Tongues (6th level), and Wind Rush (7th level).

The leader of the Faeries knows where the Shrine of Ventax is located and will lead your party there. He says, "The main path is filled with many iron-shirts, and no way through them can be found! But we know of another path, behind the Shrine is one we can follow. Beware! It is well warded by many great-evils!"

The Faeries lead the way up a steep and ominous hillside path, now overgrown with brush and vines. The Faeries urge your party to be very wary. Suddenly, ten man-sized Ratton spring out from the trees into your path.

Ratton (10): All are first level Soldiers. They each wear a suit of chain mail (A.R. 15, S.D.C. 44) and are armed with battle-axes (x3), mace and chains (x2) and halberds (x5), each inflicts 3D6+5 damage. H.P.: 26 (x2), 25 (x3) and 20 (x5), S.D.C.: 22 (x2), 20 (x3) and 15 (x5). Three attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D6+5 damage, and their bite does 1D6 damage (plus an additional 1D6 damage from a non-lethal poison). +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +5 damage, Nightvision 120 feet (36.6 m), swim 60%, track by scent 65% and a Horror Factor of 9.

- They have nothing else of any value.

A little farther up the path you discover that the way is guarded by a huge and hideous Gigante. His red eyes glare at you with hatred, his huge tusks are revealed by his grim smile. He is dressed in a suit of studded leather and holds a gigantic two-handed sword.

Gigante (1): A fourth level Mercenary Warrior. He wears a suit of studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38), and wields a two-handed sword (4D6+12 damage) and a Hercules club (4D6+12 damage). H.P.: 42, S.D.C.: 138. Three attacks per melee round; his claws inflict 4D6+12 damage and his bite does 3D6 damage. +6 to save vs Horror Factor, +5 to strike, +4 to parry, +3 to dodge, +12 damage and a Horror Factor of 14. 17 feet, 10 inches (5.4 m) tall.

Skills & Abilities: Spd 19, Climb/Scale Walls 70%/65%, Impervious to Fire (including magic), Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), See the Invisible, Speak Giant, Goblin and Eastern 98%, Swim 60%, W.P. Blunt (+7 to strike and +6 to parry), W.P. Shield (+6 to strike and parry), W.P. Spear (+7 to strike, +6 to parry and +1 to throw), W.P. Sword (+7 to strike, +6 to parry and +1 to throw), and Wilderness Survival 60%.

As you near the hill's summit, you see the Shrine, directly across a deep gorge. A stone bridge spans the chasm, but on the far side of the bridge stand two hideous, demonic creatures. One has large fangs, curling ram-like horns and goat-like legs, he stands with a huge sword in his hands. This is clearly a legendary Deevil.

The other is nearly twice as tall (16 feet/4.9 m), he has a mouthful of dripping fangs, sharp claws and goat-like legs, and his head is covered with many eyes. Suddenly, this fearsome horror speaks to your party. He says, "Welcome. We have been waiting for you, our master warned us of your coming. I am Barakiel and this is my loyal servant, Tash-Haroth. I hope you understand that we must slay you now. We can not allow you to prevent our master's triumphant return!" He turns to the Deevil and says, "Slay them!" The creature disappears and then reappears directly in front of you.

As long as the Deevil holds his own, Barakiel will not interfere.

Tash-Haroth: 4th level Deevil Warrior. Diabolic alignment. I.Q. 10, M.E. 17, M.A. 14, P.S. 22 (supernatural), P.P. 22, P.E. 22, P.B. 5, Spd 44. H.P.: 72, S.D.C.: 42. 8 feet (2.4 m) tall and weighs 500 pounds (225 kg). Four physical attacks per melee round or two by magic; his claws inflict 3D6+7 damage and his bite does 2D6 damage. +7 to strike, +9 to dodge, +10 to parry, +2 initiative, +6 to save vs Horror Factor and magic, +7 damage, a natural A.R. of 12, and a Horror Factor of 14.

R.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Bio-Regenerates 3D6 H.P./S.D.C. per melee round, can leap 30 feet (9.1 m),

Climb/Scale Walls 60%/55%, Dimensional Teleport 67%, Knows All Languages, Metamorphosis: Human, Nightvision 60 feet (18.3m), See the Invisible, Track by Scent 55%, Turn Invisible at will, W.P. Blunt (+8 to strike and +11 to parry), W.P. Chain (+8 to strike), W.P. Shield (+11 to parry), W.P. Sword (+8 to strike and +11 to parry), and Wilderness Survival 50%.

Spells: P.P.E. 100. Spell strength: 12. Blinding Flash (1st level/Fire), Cloud of Smoke (1st level/Fire), Compulsion (6th level), Create Coal (1st level/Fire), Curse: Phobia (9th level), Fiery Touch (1st level/Fire), Globe of Daylight (1st level/Fire), Heal Wounds (5th level), Impervious to Fire (1st level/Fire), Luck Curse (8th level), Nightvision (1st level/Fire), Remove Curse (11th level), Stench of Hades (1st level/Fire), and Turn Dead (2nd level).

Armor: None.

Weapons: A giant-sized bastard-sword (3D6+9 damage).

Barakiel: 4th level Horror. Aberrant alignment. I.Q. 20, M.E. 24, M.A. 8, P.S. 29 (supernatural), P.P. 20, P.E. 28, P.B. 1, Spd 40. H.P.: 88, S.D.C.: 30. 16 feet (4.9 m) tall and weighs 2,000 pounds (900 kg). Five physical attacks per melee round or two by magic; his claws inflict 6D6+14 damage and his bite does 5D6 damage. +6 to strike, parry and dodge, +5 initiative, +10 to save vs magic, +12 to save vs Horror Factor, +14 damage, a natural A.R. of 16, and a Horror Factor of 17.

R.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Bio-Regenerates 4D6 H.P./S.D.C. per melee round, can leap 100 feet (30.5 m), Climb/Scale Walls 85%/80%, Demon & Monster Lore 70%, Dimensional Teleport 82%, Impervious to Poison, Fire and Cold (magic fire and cold do half-damage), Intelligence 50%, keen vision (can not be blinded, surprised or attacked from behind), Knows All Languages, Land Navigation 70%, Military Etiquette 70%, Nightvision 120 feet (36.6 m), Recognize Weapon Quality 65%, See the Invisible, Streetwise 45%, Swim 75%, Track Humanoids 80%, Turn Invisible at will, and W.P. Blunt (+8 to strike and parry).

Spells: P.P.E. 252. Spell strength: 14. Banishment (10th level), Breathe Without Air (1st level/Air), Call Lightning (6th level), Cloud of Slumber (1st level/Air), Cloud of Steam (1st level/Air), Create Light (1st level/Air), Create Mild Wind (1st level/Air), Exorcism (8th level), Heal Wounds (5th level), Stop Wind (1st level/Air), Thunder Clap (1st level/Air), and Turn Dead (2nd level).

Armor: None.

Weapons: None. He will rely on his magic and his natural weapons, his claws and bite.

Neither of the demons have anything else of any value on them.

Chapter XI - The Shrine of Ventax

The Game Master should use Map III for this encounter. The shrine has fallen into a state of disrepair, and is now inhabited by a large group of monsters and evil humanoids.

As you examine the crumbling shrine, you find no apparent way in; each entrance is blocked with large piles of rubble and debris. The masonry of the shrine is very unstable and climbing doesn't appear to be a safe course of action. As your party ponders how you will gain entry to the shrine, you notice a small Goblin making his way towards a small side building nearby. He opens the door, looks around to make sure he wasn't followed, and then enters.

After waiting a while for him to reappear, the players will presumably decide to investigate the building.

Making your way to the small structure, you open the door and see no sign of the Goblin, but you see a large hole in the floor of this former bath-house, which leads downwards. A ladder is secured to the rim of the hole, and it appears to be sound.

The ladder leads down to the platform in the sewage tunnel (Room 1 of The Crypts). The ladder contains several traps, which are activated when anyone weighing 150 pounds (67.5 kg) or more steps on certain rungs. The traps are as follows:

- #1. Weight on this rung causes a cloud of dust to be blown into the unfortunate player's face, giving them a 25% chance of falling (this rung is 20 feet/6.1 m down, so the player would fall the remaining 80 feet/24.4 m, taking 4D6 points of damage).
- #2. Weight on this rung causes the rung the player is holding to unlock, leaving them holding a bar in their hands and certainly off-balanced, giving them a 30% chance of falling (this rung is 40 feet/12.2 m down, so the player would fall the remaining 60 feet/18.3 m, taking 3D6 points of damage).
- #3. Weight on this rung will cause a spring-loaded fist to punch the character in the mid-section, giving them a 50% chance of falling (this rung is 60 feet/18.3 m down, so the player would fall the remaining 40 feet/12.2 m, inflicting 2D6 points of damage in addition to the 2D6 points of damage from the punch).

There are no more traps on the ladder. It goes 100 feet (30.5 m) down, ending at the landing in Room 1.

The walls of the shrine are badly eroded, and any character that attempts to climb the structure is given a -70% modifier to their Climb/Scale Walls skill. They will take 1D6 points of damage for every 20 feet/6.1 m that they fall. If the players attempt to count the number of floors in the shrine, they will come up with four, not five. The fifth floor is hidden by the deific magic of Ventax. If the players attempt to use magic to view the structure, they still will not see the last floor; the whole shrine radiates a strong aura of magic.

The Crypts (Rooms 1 - 21)

Use Map III A for this floor.

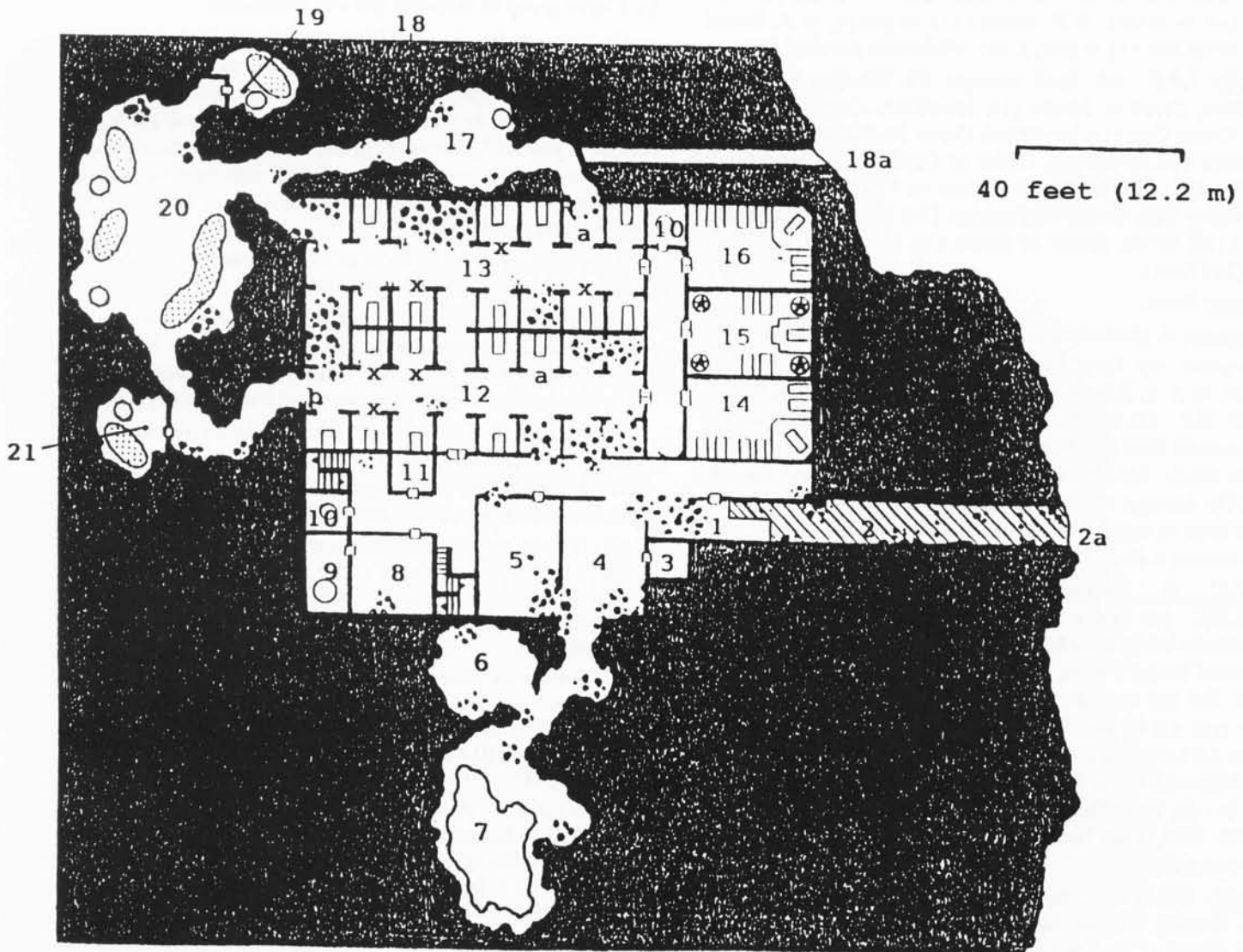
The Landing (Room 1)

At the bottom of this ladder is a small stone landing. At its base is a swirling pool of murky and reeking, filthy water. Sewage floats down a tunnel to one side.

The crypts are accessible only by entering room 31 above and climbing down the ladder to this landing.

Map III A -- The Shrine of Ventax

The Crypts, Rooms 1-21



The Sewage Tunnel (Room 2)

In this rubble-filled tunnel flows a 1 foot (0.3 m) deep stream of water, filled with raw and stinking sewage.

There are two rusted iron portcullises in the tunnel, which were once used to keep wild animals from entering the crypts. The tunnel ends at 2a, where it opens out into the 1,000 feet (305 m) deep gorge.

The Treasure Vault (Room 3)

As you enter this debris-filled room, you spot a large number of glittering coins scattered around on the floor. In the far corner you see a rat the size of a dog fearlessly growling at you.

Giant Rat (1): A.R. 3, H.P.: 15. It has 2 attacks per melee round; its bite inflicts 2D4 damage. +2 initiative, +4 to strike and dodge, Nightvision 200 feet (61.1 m), climb 70%, acrobatics 35%, prowl 80%, swim 65%, and a Horror Factor of 11.

A careful search of this room by the players will uncover 224 gold in various small coins. In addition the players will also discover 24 small gemstones: 5 worth 25 gold each, 4 worth 10 gold each, and 15 worth 5 gold each.

Guardroom (Room 4)

This room's floor is covered with rock chips and other debris. Around a small pile of coins on the floor, four Goblins casually sit, throwing their bone dice and boasting to each other.

Goblins (4): All are first level Soldiers. All wear studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38) and are armed with spears (1D6+1 damage). H.P.: 20, 18, and 15 (x2), S.D.C.: 15, 13, and 10 (x2). Each has two attacks per melee round. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to strike, parry and dodge, +1 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 25%, and Underground Tunneling 35%.

In a pile on the floor are 66 gold in various small coins.

The Granary (Room 5)

This room is filled with crumbling masonry, stone chips and other debris. The floor is covered in a 1 foot (0.3 m) deep layer of seed and grain.

Guardroom (Room 6)

As you enter this cavern you see a Goblin and a Hobgoblin engaged in an arm-wrestling match. They are seated on the

dust-covered floor with their elbows resting on an empty wooden crate. A group of cheering Goblins and Hobgoblins stand in a circle, surrounding them.

Goblins (10): All are first level Soldiers. All wear studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38) and are armed with short swords (2D4+1 damage). H.P.: 17 (x7), 15 (x2) and 14, S.D.C.: 12 (x7), 10 (x2) and 9. Each has two attacks per melee round. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to strike, parry and dodge, +1 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 25%, and Underground Tunneling 35%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 11 gold, 8 gold, 6 gold (x4) and 3 gold (x4).

Hobgoblins (5): All are 2nd level Soldiers. All wear chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44) and are armed with pick-mattocks (3D4+1 damage). H.P.: 22, 21 (x2), 19 and 17, S.D.C.: 12, 11 (x2), 9 and 7. Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 initiative, +1 to strike and parry, +2 to dodge, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 20% and Underground Tunneling 30%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 19 gold, 18 gold, 15 gold, 12 gold and 11 gold.

Lava Pool (Room 7)

A blast of searing heat assails your party as you travel further down this tunnel, and finally the heat forces you back.

This small cavern contains a boiling pool of lava. Nearby, underground vents enter the Hypocausts (Room 10), filling them with superheated air which in turn heats the shrine and chapterhouse.

Guardroom (Room 8)

As you attempt to open this heavy stone door, it suddenly falls outward and onto your party. As the dust settles, you see a group of small humanoids with large, sharp clawed hands, their single cyclopean eyes staring at you unblinkingly. Their amused grins reveal rows of sharp teeth, and then without warning they heft their maces and charge your party, howling shrilly.

Boogie-Men (8): All are second level Thieves. None of them wear armor (A.R. 1) and they are all armed with maces (2D6+1 damage). H.P.: 28 (leader), 25, 22 (x2) and 18 (x4), S.D.C.: 55 (leader), 48, 38 (x2) and 30 (x4). Each has four attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 1D4+1 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. +2 initiative (when attacking from behind or from shadows), +2 strike and parry, +4 dodge, +4 to save vs all poisons, +1 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), poor day vision, prowl 77%, climb/scale walls 80%/70%, and a Horror Factor of 12.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 13 gold, 10 gold, 7 gold (x3) and 5 gold (x3).

The Boogie-men have a special knock which the others recognize and will cause them to replace the door hinges, disarming the door-trap. The secret knock is: one soft, two hard, one soft. The door's collapse will inflict 2D6 points of damage to any character within 5 feet (1.5 m) of the doorway; in addition the players lose the initiative for the first round.

Cistern-Well (Room 9)

This room holds a deep well-shaft which contains fresh water. There is nothing else of any value in the chamber.

Hypocausts (Room 10)

These are the heating vent-shafts described in the Room 7 entry. They hold nothing of any value, and are unbearably hot.

Rat Kennels (Room 11)

This debris-filled chamber contains a small pack of serpentine rats, which warily eye your party. Slowly the dog-sized creatures begin to make their way towards you, growling and hissing viciously.

Serpent Rats (17): A.R. 9, H.P.: 25 (leader), 22 (x2), 20 (x4), 17 (x3), 15 (x7), S.D.C.: 12 each. Each has 2 attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 1D4 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage. +1 initiative, +1 to strike, +3 dodge, +2 to save vs Horror Factor and +4 to save vs poisons. They have Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m), climb 86%, swim 50%, track by scent 30%, prowl 40%, can chew through wood and clay at a rate of six square inches (38.7 square cm) per minute, and a Horror Factor of 10.

There is nothing in this chamber of any value.

Southern Crypts (Room 12)

The overwhelming darkness of the crypts temporarily blinds you as the party enters this large chamber. When your eyes finally get adjusted to the darkness, you see a large number of arched alcoves along the walls. Some have collapsed beneath a pile of rubble and others still contain their stone burial vaults.

Encounter 12a

As you approach this alcove, you begin to hear scraping sounds and muffled curses coming from inside. As you round the corner you see a small Goblin perched on the top of the stone burial vault, desperately trying to pry a gemstone loose. As he hears your approach he turns and looks at you with a smile and a shrug of his tiny shoulders. Then with blinding speed, he leaps to the floor and darts through your party, disappearing around the corner.

The epitaph on the vault reads as follows: "Lady Niamh of the three roses. House Lorcan."

The gemstone is a fist-sized sapphire worth 500 gold.

Encounter 12b

This alcove is an entrance to the Goblin and Hobgoblin lair. It is also booby-trapped — a hidden tripwire will cause a hail of stones to rain down on the players from above, inflicting 2D6 points of damage to all of the players in the alcove.

Encounter 12x (x3)

These three alcoves are cursed, and the first character to disturb each of these vaults in search of loot will receive one of the following curses:

- **Hallucinatory noises.** The afflicted character will hear noises constantly, especially in the darkness. This will keep the character in a constant state of anxiety, never allowing him or her to rest or relax. The curse will last for 1D6 weeks or until dispelled by magic.
- **Vulnerability.** The afflicted character will receive a -2 modifier on all of his or her saving throws. The curse will last for 1D6 months. This curse is so subtle that a character may just think he or she is unlucky.
- **Cold.** The afflicted character will always feel cold, no matter how much clothing he or she is wearing. The curse will last for 1D6 weeks or until dispelled by magic.

All of the other crypts are empty and contain no treasures. In addition, all of the other epitaphs are so badly worn that they can not be read.



Northern Crypts (Room 13)

This chamber is nearly identical to Room 12, and it is also filled with debris and litter.

Encounter 13a

This alcove is another entrance to the lair of the Goblins and Hobgoblins. It is also booby-trapped — a hidden tripwire will cause the support pins holding the right wall to be released, allowing the wall to fall inward, inflicting 3D6 points of damage to all of the players in the alcove.

Encounter 13x (x3)

These three alcoves are cursed, and the first character to disturb each of these vaults in search of loot will receive one of the following curses:

- **Obsessive Hate.** The afflicted character will develop an immediate dislike for the first individual in the party he or she sees. The character has a 25% chance of attacking the object of this hatred at any time of crisis. The curse will last for 1D6 days or until dispelled by magic.
- **Fear of the Dark.** The afflicted character will develop an immediate fear of darkness. The character has a 60% chance to remain in control of this fear while in a group, however, if the roll fails or the character is alone he or she will react as follows: 01-25% pass out for 2D4 minutes, 26-80% run/flee at top speed, allowing nothing to stop them, 81-100% paralyzed by their fear, the character will stand immobile, sobbing and shaking. Luckily this curse only lasts 1D6 weeks or until it is dispelled by magic.
- **Glow.** The afflicted character will immediately begin to glow. They receive the following advantages/disadvantages: P.B. is reduced by 2 points, prowl -5%, -2 initiative, and a Horror Factor of 9. In addition, the player will be the first in the party to be attacked, and the glow attracts insects at night. The curse will last for 1D6 weeks or until dispelled by magic.

Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Ulaith (Room 14)

Above this double door you see an engraved plaque; it reads, "The Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Ulaith."

Ahead, you can see two burial vaults, and to your right you see four. On a raised dais, in the far right corner, you see another vault.

As you enter the room, a searing pain rips through your muscles as if they were all on fire! The agony is almost unbearable!

The chamber has been warded by several wards: Area Effect, Inflict and Burning Pain. All players in this chamber receive 3D6 points of damage per melee from the ward; it is active for 12 melee rounds.

The monarchs in this chamber reigned between 400 and 700 years ago. Each vault has an engraved epitaph on it; those on the right wall read:

- "King Suihne the sorrowful, King of Rhiann. Slain at the hands of his son."
- "King Crunmael the fearless. King of Rhiann."
- "King Govannon the hammerer. King of Rhiann. Teacher of fear to the Giants and Trolls."
- "Queen Liatha the gentle. Queen of Rhiann."

The vaults ahead read:

- "Princess Aevha of the flaming hair. Daughter of King Illan the sage. War-mistress. Known to the Orcs, Ogres and Goblins as the flaming she-devil."
- "Prince Maelgwyn the kinslayer. Son of King Suihne the sorrowful. The accursed Prince, slayer of Suihne."

The vault on the raised dais reads:

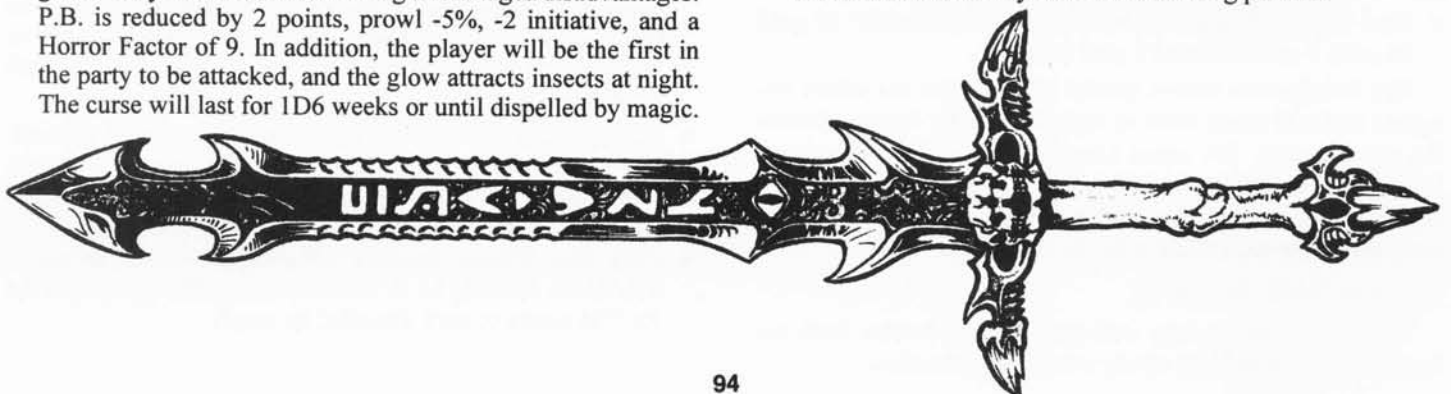
- "King Illan the sage. King of Rhiann. The wise and just Magister."

The following items are located in the chamber:

In the vault of Prince Maelgwyn is a well-crafted bastard-sword, that is made of a black metal and has the name "Kinslayer" written on the blade in red runes (in an ancient tongue). It has the following powers:

- Indestructible. I.Q. 16. Communicates through telepathy.
- Inflicts 5D6 points of damage, and never dulls.
- Diabolic alignment. Will inflict 3D6 points of damage to those of good alignments who touch it, and attempt to wield it.
- Links itself to the player using it within six months, corrupting them and turning their alignment to Diabolic! Additionally, the player will be able to sense the sword's presence within a four mile (6.4 km) radius, if separated.

In the vault of King Govannon is an elaborately engraved pair of silver arm-bracers, covered with a great number of runes and wards. They have the following powers:



- Protection from charm, magic, psionics and wards (+3 on all saving throws!).
- Impervious to cold, fire, Horror Factor and poisons.
- Healing touch (restores 2D6 H.P./S.D.C. twice per 24 hour period).

In addition to these magical items, the players may discover 197 small gemstones (18 amethysts worth 135 gold each, 59 emeralds worth 250 gold each, 56 rubies worth 250 gold each, and 64 sapphires worth 180 gold each), and 279 semi-precious stones (69 small pieces of amber worth 50 gold each, 20 small pieces of ivory worth 15 gold each, 89 small pieces of jade worth 20 gold each, 75 black opals worth 20 gold each, and 26 pearls worth 20 gold each). There are also two silver crowns (worth 700 gold each), two silver circlets (worth 500 gold each), four ermine cloaks (worth 500 gold each), a fine cloak of ermine and sable (worth 1000 gold), and a beautiful golden crown (worth 1000 gold). The crowns are ensorcelled so that if they are removed from the crypts and taken to be sold, they will not appear to be worth as much as first thought (the buyer will only pay one half of their actual value due to this enchantment).

Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Dannath (Room 15)

Above this double door you see an engraved plaque; it reads, "The Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Dannath." Ahead, you see a burial vault on a raised dais, to your right and left you see two more vaults against each wall. In each corner you see a huge (8 feet/2.4 m tall) statue of an armed warrior bearing a halberd.

As you prepare to enter, you spot a cleverly hidden trip-wire.

The trip-wire actually disarms the trap by locking the trap with hidden pins. If the players step over the wire without tripping it, it will cause two spring-loaded clubs to be released and come swinging back around towards the door, inflicting 3D6 points of damage when they strike the player or players in the doorway. The boards are set at a height of about 5.5 feet (1.7 m) and 3.5 feet (1.05 m), and strike as soon as the players step on the pressure plate in the doorway!

The monarchs in this chamber reigned between 1800 and 1500 years ago. Each vault has an engraved epitaph on it; those against the left wall read:

- High-King Tuireann the defender. High-King and overlord of Rhianna.
- High-King Gorseth of the greenwood. High-King and overlord of Rhianna.

Those against the right wall read:

- High-King Ossian the poet-bard. The silver-tongued poet-king. High-King and overlord of Rhianna.
- Grand-Prince Elathan the merciful. Son of High-King Ossian of the silvery words.

The vault ahead reads:

- High-Queen Dana the fair. The holy and pure-hearted maiden. High-Queen and overmistress of Rhianna.

The following items are located in the chamber:

In the vault of High-King Ossian is a beautifully crafted ring made of twisted gold and silver. It is magical and has the following powers:

- Indestructible.
- The owner magically understands and speaks all known languages.

- Public Speaking and Sing at the base skill of 75% (or +15% if the character already has these skills).
- +3 to M.A. and P.B.

In the vault of High-King Gorseth is a well-crafted longbow made of yew. It glows with a bright, silver-blue light. It is magical and has the following powers:

- Indestructible. Glows with a silver-blue light at all times.
- Fires small orbs of fire, which inflict 2D6 damage; the bow has an endless supply of these bolts.

In addition to these magic items, the players will discover 172 small gemstones (29 diamonds, 32 emeralds, 19 garnets, 50 rubies and 42 sapphires), and small iron chest filled with 850 gold in coins. There are also five golden crowns, and five fine cloaks made of sable, ermine and vair (worth 1500 gold each). The gemstones are enchanted so that they will turn to dust upon contact with the sunlight. The chest of coins is also ensorcelled — upon contact with the sunlight the entire chest and its contents will explode, inflicting 1D6 points of damage to anyone within a 10 foot (3 m) radius. And, finally, the crowns are also enchanted — they will teleport back to the vaults as soon as they are taken from the crypts and the shrine.

Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Liath (Room 16)

Above this double door you see an engraved plaque; it reads, "The Royal Sepulcher of House Bri-Liath." You see two burial vaults ahead, against the left wall are four others, and in the far left corner is another, set on a raised dais.

The monarchs in this chamber have reigned for the last 400 years; they are the ancestors of Princess Cyrilla. Each vault has an engraved epitaph on it; those against the left wall read:

- Queen Medhvha the haughty. Queen of Rhiann.
- Queen Morganna the fierce. Demon-Slayer. Queen of Rhiann.
- Queen Eigyr the Spear-maiden. Mistress of the light, conqueror of death. Queen of Rhiann.
- King Manann the wave-rider. King of Rhiann.

Those against the far wall read:

- Prince Nemedh of the two blades. Son of Queen Eigyr the Spear-maiden.
- Princess Emhainna of the golden-hair. Gentle healer. Daughter of King Eochaidh the just.

The vault on the dais reads:

- King Eochaidh the just. King of Rhiann.

The following items are located in the chamber:

In the vault of Queen Eigyr is a beautiful circlet of twisted silver and gold; it has the following powers:

- Negates magic potions (50% chance), and negates all poisons (85% chance).

In the vault of Queen Morganna the Demon-Slayer is a fine pair of steel gauntlets, covered in glowing red runes. They are obviously magical and have the following powers:

- +5 to all saving throws against magic, possession and psionics.
- Impervious to charm and Horror Factor!
- Can fire a bolt of energy at will. Roll on the following chart to see what random energy form is fired.

01-25% Fire (4D6 damage)

26-50% Ice (4D6 damage)

51-75% Lightning (4D6 damage)

76-100% Force (4D6 damage, and sends the victim reeling 20 feet/6.1 m backwards. If the victim is thrown against a wall they will also receive an additional 1D6 points of damage!)

- Can fire a bolt of spiritual energy once per 24 hour period, inflicting 4D6 damage against common foes, 5D6 against undead creatures, 6D6 against Dragons and Elementals, and 7D6 against Demons, Deevils and other supernatural evils!

In the vault of Prince Nemedh is a beautiful suit of scale armor, formed in alternating rows of silver and bronze scales. It is weightless, noiseless, and is impervious to fire (magic fire does half-damage). A.R. 16, S.D.C. 75.

All other items are relics of Princess Cyrilla's ancestors, and she will not allow anyone to loot her family's treasure. She will allow the players to possess the magical items though. If any attempt to steal some of the loot, a powerful ward of death will take effect upon the character (5D6 points of damage per round for a duration of 10 rounds). Be sure that the character's are strongly warned against this course of action!

Barracks (Room 17)

This cavern is filled with a large group of Goblin and Hobgoblin Soldiers. They are seated on the dirt covered floor, eating and drinking very noisily. The chamber echoes with the sounds of the voices singing off-key songs and boasting, the smacking of their lips and loud belching.

Goblins (20): All are first level Soldiers. All wear studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38) and are armed with short swords (2D4+1 damage). H.P.: 20 (x3), 18 (x4), 17, 16 (x6) and 15 (x6), S.D.C.: 15 (x3), 13 (x4), 12, 11 (x6) and 10 (x6). Each has two attacks per melee round. +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to strike, parry and dodge, +1 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 25%, and Underground Tunneling 35%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 13 gold (x4), 10 gold (x3), 9 gold (x2), 7 gold (x3), 6 gold (x2) and 5 gold (x6).

Hobgoblins (17): All are second level Soldiers. All wear chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44) and are armed with pick-mattocks (3D4+1 damage). H.P.: 23, 22 (x5), 21 (x3) and 20 (x8), S.D.C.: 13, 12 (x5), 11 (x3) and 10 (x8). Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 initiative, +1 to strike and parry, +2 to dodge, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 20% and Underground Tunneling 30%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 20 gold (x2), 17 gold (x4), 16 gold (x4), 17 gold (x4) and 13 gold (x3).

Floor Trap (Area 18)

This section of the tunnel contains a trap door in the floor. It drops any characters in this 10 foot x 10 foot (3x3 m) section into a grease-covered chute. The chute slants away at a 45° angle, ending at **18a**, where it opens out into the 1,000 feet (305 m) deep gorge. If a character falls into the gorge it will effectively kill him/her, inflicting 50D6 points of damage from the fall!

Goblin Chieftan's Chambers (Room 19)

As you enter this cavern you notice a filthy pile of sleeping furs on the floor, amidst the dust and crumbling stone. Seated on the furs is a large Goblin with his arms around the shoulders of two she-Goblins. As you enter unexpectedly, the nude she-Goblins try to escape from the room, offering no resistance. The Goblin Chieftan leaps to his feet and grabs a spear from against the wall.

Vaalg Grimsteel: 4th level Goblin Soldier. Miscreant alignment. He is unarmored and is absolutely nude, but armed with a spear (1D6+3 damage). H.P.: 36, S.D.C.: 31. Three attacks per melee round. +3 to save vs Horror Factor, +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +3 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Underground Architecture 30%, Underground Sense of Direction 40% and Underground Tunneling 50%.

Underneath the pile of furs is a small leather bag, which contains 127 gold in various coins.

Common Chamber (Room 20)

This large cavern is filled with a great number of she-Goblins, she-Hobgoblins, their young and their elders. They are engaged in various domestic chores, mostly around their blazing fire-pits.

At the base of the cavern's walls, on the ground are many piles of sleeping furs.

There are 12 Goblin and 18 Hobgoblin young, and 6 Goblin and 10 Hobgoblin elders; all of which are non-combatants. In addition there are:

Goblin females (36) and Hobgoblin females (24): H.P.: 8 each, S.D.C.: 5 each, all are unarmed but will fight with claw and tooth. Each has one attack per melee round; their claws inflict 1D4 damage and their bite does 1D3 damage. The Goblins have Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m) and the Hobgoblins have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m).

There is nothing of any value or worth to be found in this chamber.

Hobgoblin Chieftain's Chambers (Room 21)

As you enter this chamber you spot a large Hobgoblin seated on the filth-covered floor, counting a sack of glittering coins. When he notices your entrance, he grabs up his spiked mace and charges you with a savage snarl of hate.

Threkht the Man-Slayer: 5th level Hobgoblin Soldier. Diabolic alignment. He is wearing a suit of soft leather armor (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20) and is armed with a spiked mace (2D4+4 damage). H.P.: 42, S.D.C.: 32. Three attacks per melee round. +2 initiative, +2 to strike and parry, +3 to dodge, +4 damage, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Underground Architecture 30%, Underground Sense of Direction 35% and Underground Tunneling 45%.

The leather bag on the floor contains: 224 gold in various coins.

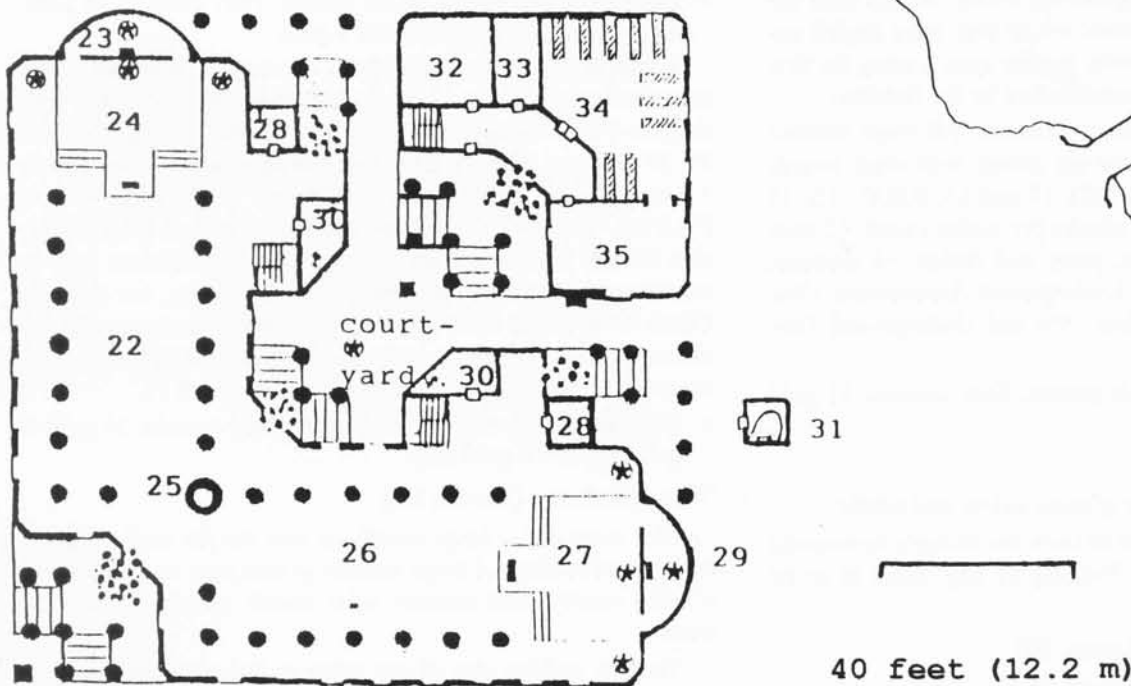


Map III B -- The Shrine of Ventax

Main Floor

Temple, Rooms 22-31

Chapterhouse, Rooms 32-35



Main Floor (Rooms 22 - 35)

Use Map III B for this floor.

The Western Naos (Room 22)

This large and spacious, high-ceilinged chamber is well-lit by the huge crystal windows on either side of the room. Rows of massive stone columns line the room on each side of the chamber, creating aisles between them and the windows. At the end of the large room is a three foot (1 m) high raised platform on which an altar stands. To either side of the altar, against the back wall are two badly defaced marble statues. Directly behind the altar is an immense statue of a bearded old man dressed in robes. In his right hand rests a large orb, and in his left is a great sword.

There is nothing of any value or worth in this chamber. The great statue is that of the god of light, Ventax.

The Western Sanctum (Room 23)

This small cell is bare except for a small altar near the far wall, and a small statue of the god from the outer room.

There is nothing of any value or worth in this chamber.

Western Altar Pulpit (Area 24)

This three foot (1 m) high raised platform has a marble altar on it, and to either side of it are two badly defaced marble statues. Directly behind the altar is a huge (12 feet/3.7 m tall) statue of a serene, bearded man dressed in fine robes. In his right hand is an orb and in his left hand is a great sword.

There is nothing of any value to be found on this platform. The great statue is that of the god of light, Ventax.

The Font (Area 25)

As you near this 3 foot (1 m) high, stone water-font, you begin to hear muffled and garbled curses, and the splashing of water. As you approach, your party spots two Hobgoblins mercilessly dunking a howling and flailing Goblin in the water. You can hear the poor creature pleading with the laughing Hobgoblins to no avail. One of the Hobgoblins tells it, "We told ya bloody pests to stay off of ar turf, didn't we? But no, here ya come, tryin' to rob us of our stuff, eh?" As the Hobgoblins hear your approach, they drop the drenched Goblin and turn to face your group. One tells the other, "Oh great, more looters." The Goblin turns and flees down the naos.

Hobgoblins (2): Both are second-level Soldiers. Both wear chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44) and are armed with pick-mattocks (3D4+1 damage). H.P.: 22 and 20, S.D.C.: 12 and 10. Both have two attacks per melee round. +1 initiative, +1 to strike and parry, +2 to dodge, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 20% and Underground Tunneling 30%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain 14 and 12 gold.

The Eastern Naos (Room 26)

This chamber is identical to Room 22.

Eastern Altar Pulpit (Area 27)

This area is identical to Area 24.

Nearing the platform your party notices a group of Goblins dressed in oversized clerical robes, standing near the marble al-

tar. As they spot your approach, their leader steps forward threateningly, crosses his arms and says, "Begone! Or I'll unleash mighty magicks on you ugly things!" The others, standing in a group behind him, nod in agreement.

If the players are unimpressed or don't leave, the Goblin will roll up his sleeves and begin to mumble incoherently. Soon he begins to madly dance about, gesturing wildly. At this time the other Goblins reveal a large mirror which they have angled upwards to shine the sunlight directly in your eyes. Losing the first round of initiative, the players are attacked by the Goblins.

Goblins (5): All are first level Soldiers. All wear studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38) and are armed with short swords (2D4+1 damage). H.P.: 20, 18 (x2), 17 and 15, S.D.C.: 15, 13 (x2), 12 and 10. Each has two attacks per melee round. +2 save vs Horror Factor, +1 to strike, parry and dodge, +1 damage. Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 25% and Underground Tunneling 35%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 11 gold (x2) and 10 gold (x3).

Vestry (Room 28)

This room is filled with piles of stone debris and rubble.

These rooms were once used to store the shrine's ceremonial robes and priestly vestments. Nothing of any value is to be found in the chamber.

The Eastern Sanctum (Room 29)

This chamber is identical to Room 23.

Sacristy (Room 30)

This room is also filled with stone debris and rubble.

These rooms were once used to store the shrine's sacred relics and holiest of artifacts. Nothing of any value is to be found in this chamber.

Wash-House Secret Entrance (Room 31)

This small outer building once housed the shrine's wash-house. It is now empty, and a large hole fills the chamber's former floor, with a ladder bolted down to the hole's edge.

The ladder leads down to Room 1, in the crypts.

Pantry (Room 32)

This room is filled with rows of wooden barrels, which are stacked two high.

There are 54 barrels of various foodstuffs. Nothing else of any value is to be found in the chamber.

Buttery (Room 33)

This room is also filled with rows of double-stacked wooden casks.

There are 34 casks of a common ale. Nothing else of any value is to be found in this chamber.

Refectory (Room 34)

This large chamber is the dining hall of the Chapterhouse. It contains ten long tables and their benches. Scattered about the room, eating their meals, are several Hobgoblins and Ratlings.

Hobgoblins (7): All are second level Soldiers. None are wearing armor (A.R. 1), and they are unarmed except for daggers (1D6+1 damage). H.P.: 20 (x4), 18, and 17 (x2), S.D.C.: 10

(x4), 8, and 7 (x2). Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 initiative, +1 to strike and parry, +2 to dodge, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Underground Architecture 15%, Underground Sense of Direction 20%, and Underground Tunneling 30%.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 16 gold, 15 gold (x3), 14 gold (x2) and 8 gold.

Ratlings (5): All are third level Mercenary Warriors. None are wearing any armor (A.R. 1), and they are armed only with daggers (1D6 damage). H.P.: 32, 30 (x2) and 27 (x2), S.D.C.: 27, 25 (x2) and 22 (x2). Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 to initiative, strike, parry and dodge. Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), "Passive" Nightvision 1200 feet (366 m), poor day vision 90 feet (27.4 m), keen hearing, sensitive whiskers help to maneuver in the dark or when blind (penalties are halved), Climb 70%, Swim 70%, Imitate Voices 60%, Underground Architecture 35%, Underground Sense of Direction 55%/40%, Underground Tunneling 45%, and a Horror Factor of 11.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 10 gold, 8 gold (x2) and 6 gold (x2).

The Kitchens (Room 35)

This room has a large hearth set into the far wall, used for baking and cooking. A large number of iron pots and pans sit on a table nearby, and another table stands nearby against the wall.

There is nothing else of any value or interest to be found in this chamber.

First Floor (Rooms 36 - 55)

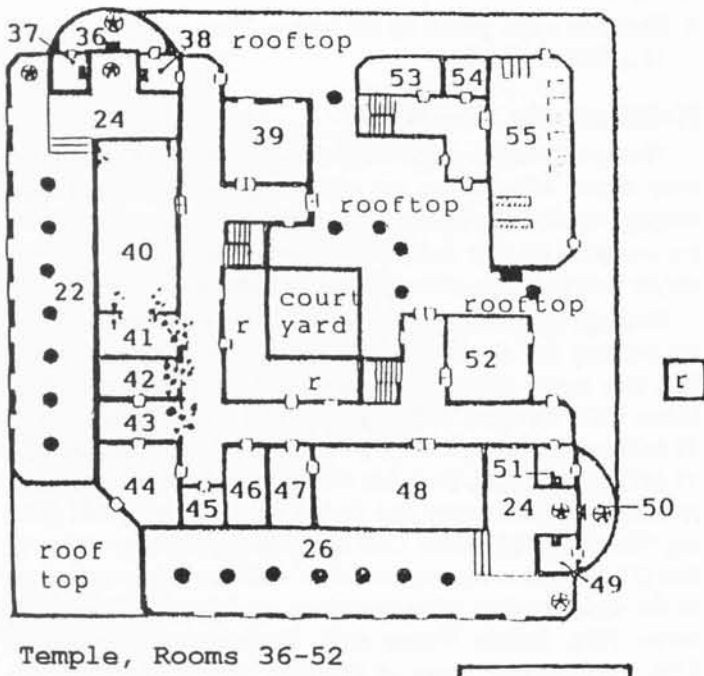
Use Map III C for this floor.



Map III C -- The Shrine of Ventax

First Floor

Chapterhouse, Rooms 53-55



40 feet (12.2 m)

Private Chapel (Room 36)

This chamber is identical to Room 23, below.

Shrine of Contemplation (Room 37)

This private cell contains a small, unadorned altar, which stands against the opposite wall. Above the altar hovers a glowing, silver orb.

If a character touches the orb (a holy symbol of Ventax) or the altar, he or she will receive a vision of great significance, revealing a deep and meaningful secret. As a result, the first character who touches this item gains +3 to his or her I.Q. and +2 to M.E. However, if the character is evil the gains will be significantly less: +1 to I.Q. and M.E.

Shrine of Restoration (Room 38)

This chamber is identical to room 37.

Any character who touches the orb or the altar in this room will instantly feel as if they had slept for a full night and all of their aches and wounds would be healed. The character (regardless of their alignment) receives all of their lost Hit Points and S.D.C. (this can only be done once per character!).

Master's Chambers (Room 39)

As you enter this dust-covered and debris filled chamber, you spot several Hobgoblins standing together in a group, intently watching as one of them throws darts at a target on the opposite wall. Near the base of the walls are their filthy sleeping furs, and on a small wooden table are their wagers.

Hobgoblin Officers (5): All are third level Soldiers. They wear no armor (A.R. 1) and are armed with long swords (2D6+2 damage) and daggers (1D6+2 damage). H.P.: 30, 29, 28 (x2) and 26, S.D.C.: 20, 19, 18 (x2) and 16. Each has two attacks per

melee round. +1 initiative, +2 to strike and parry, +3 to dodge, +2 to save vs psionics, possession and Horror Factor. Keen Hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Underground Architecture 20%, Underground Sense of Direction 25% and Underground Tunneling 35%.

The pile of money on the table totals 289 gold in various small coins.

Hall (Room 40)

This large chamber is bristling with a large number of she-Hobgoblins, their young and their elders. They are engaged in various domestic chores. Near the base of the hall's walls are their sleeping furs.

There are 11 Hobgoblin young and 12 elders, all of which are noncombatants. In addition there are:

Hobgoblin females (32): H.P.: 8 each, S.D.C.: 5 each, all are unarmed and will fight with claw and tooth. Each has one attack per melee round; their claws inflict 1D4 damage and their bite does 1D3 damage. They have Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m).

There is nothing of any value or worth to be found in this chamber.

Bedroom/Pantry (Room 41)

This room is filled with rows of double-stacked barrels.

There are 16 barrels of various foodstuffs. Nothing else of any value is to be found in this chamber.

Bedroom/Treasury (Room 42)

This small room is filled with piles of stone chips and rubble, and sitting amidst the debris you spot four small, wooden chests.

The chests are unlocked and contain the following:

- The first contains silver coins worth 585 gold.
- The second contains 306 gold in various coins.
- The third contains 736 gold in various coins.
- The fourth, and last contains 125 gemstones (30 emeralds worth 20 gold each, 82 rubies worth 10 gold each, and 13 sapphires worth 15 gold each).

Bedroom/Armory (Room 43)

This room contains a great number of common weapons, hanging from various racks on the walls.

There are 59 spears, 34 halberds, 12 hand-axes, 8 battleaxes, 42 pick-mattocks, 12 quarter-staves, 26 throwing knives, 12 daggers, 18 maces, 10 morning stars, 15 war hammers, 9 short swords, 3 war-flails, and 14 long swords.

All of these weapons are of common quality.

Study/Guardroom (Room 44)

As you enter this small chamber, you see a large group of Rattons scattered around the room. Some sit on their sleeping furs against the walls, and some are sitting at a long wooden table drinking ale from their wooden tankards, chattering to each other in their own tongue. As they spot your party, they spring unsteadily to their feet, clumsily draw their long swords and begin to stagger towards you.

Rattons (10): All are first level Soldiers. They wear no armor, but have a natural A.R. of 6; they are armed with long swords (3D6+5 damage). H.P.: 24 (x3), 22 (x5), 20 and 19, S.D.C.: 20 (x3), 18 (x5), 16 and 15. Each has three attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D6+5 damage and their bite

does 1D6 damage + an additional 1D6 from a non-lethal poison. +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +5 damage, Nightvision 120 feet (36.6 m), swim 60%, track by scent 65% and a Horror Factor of 9.

Each is clearly drunken, therefore they are -4 initiative, -2 to strike, parry and dodge, and move at half of their normal speed.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 4 gold, 3 gold (x4) and 2 gold (x5).

Privies (Room 45)

This chamber contains the shrine's latrines.

Bedroom (Room 46)

This room is furnished as most of the rooms you've encountered have been. A dark-robed Hobgoblin sits upon the stone floor, eyes closed in meditation; his morning-star and helm sit beside him. As you enter, he calmly stands up, donning his helm and hefting the morning-star, then he smiles a snaggle-toothed grin.

Skull-Mender the Mad: 4th level Hobgoblin Shaman. Miscreant alignment (was formerly Unprincipled, until he went insane). H.P.: 35, S.D.C.: 25. 4 feet 3 inches (1.3 m) tall and weighs 110 pounds (49.5 kg). Three attacks per melee round. +1 initiative, +1 to strike and parry, +2 to dodge, +1 damage, +2 to save vs poisons, disease and psionics, +4 to save vs possession and +6 to save vs Horror Factor. P.P.E. 110.

Insanities: Is sadistic and paranoid; he has had an alignment rebirth to evil.

O.C.C. & Natural abilities: Chants 40% (taking 2D4 minutes to perform): Animate Objects, Astral Projection, Blessing, Breathe Without Air, Call Lightning, Calm Storms, Circle of Fire, Decipher Magic, Detect Poison, Divination, Dreaming, Energy Bolt, Exorcism, Extinguish Fires, Fear (Horror Factor: 16), Fuel Flame, Healing, Ignite Fires, Levitation, Mend Cloth, Mystic Portal, Negate Poisons/Toxins, Purification, Remove Curse, Repel Animals, Summon & Control Storms, Thunder Clap, Tongues, Turn Dead, Water to Wine and Wink-Out.

Keen hearing, Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), sense confined mystic energy 55% at a distance of 18 feet (5.5 m), sense ley lines 36%, sense mystical beings 45% at a distance of 18 feet (5.5 m), Underground Architecture 25%, Underground Sense of Direction 30% and Underground Tunneling 40%.

Skills: Holistic Medicine 60%/50%, Speak Eastern, Elven and Goblin 98% and W.P. Blunt (+4 to strike and parry).

Armor: He wears a suit of soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20).

Weapons: He wields a morning-star (2D6+1 damage).

- He has a belt pouch on his person, which contains 43 gold.

Bedroom (Room 47)

This room contains three sleeping pallets, each of which is covered with various furs. As you enter, you see three Ratlings seated on the dirty floor, eating their meal. As soon as they see you, they jump to their feet and draw their curved scimitars.

Ratling Officers (3): Two are fourth level Mercenary Warriors, while the other is fifth level. They are wearing soft leather (A.R. 10, S.D.C. 20) and are armed with scimitars (2D6 damage). H.P.: 45, 38 and 36, S.D.C.: 40, 33 and 31. Each has three attacks per melee round. +2 initiative, strike, parry and dodge. Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), "Passive" Nightvision 1200 feet (366 m), poor day vision 90 feet (27.4 m), keen hearing, sensi-

tive whiskers help maneuver in the dark or when blind (penalties are halved), Climb 70%, Swim 70%, Imitate Voices 60%, Underground Architecture 40%, Underground Sense of Direction 60%/45%, and Underground Tunneling 50%, and a Horror Factor of 11.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 24 gold, 15 gold and 13 gold.

Hall/Barracks (Room 48)

This great room is filled with a large number of Ratlings and their Ratton allies. Many are sitting together in small groups tossing the dice or playing other games of chance. The others are occupied by their boisterous feasting and drinking. Against the far wall is a large pile of filthy straw and sleeping furs.

Ratlings (30): All are third level Mercenary Warriors. None are wearing any armor (A.R. 1), and they are unarmed for the first two melee rounds. Then they will be able to grab their spears (1D6 damage). H.P.: 30 (x4), 28 (x3), 26 (x2), 24 (x8), 23 (x2) and 20 (x11), S.D.C.: 25 (x4), 23 (x3), 21 (x2), 19 (x8), 18 (x2) and 15 (x11). Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 to initiative, strike, parry and dodge. Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), "Passive" Nightvision 1200 feet (366 m), poor day vision 90 feet (27.4 m), keen hearing, sensitive whiskers help to maneuver in the dark or when blind (penalties are halved), Climb 70%, Swim 70%, Imitate Voices 60%, Underground Architecture 35%, Underground Sense of Direction 55%/40% and Underground Tunneling 45%, and a Horror Factor of 11.

- 19 have belt pouches. They contain: 8 gold (x3), 7 gold (x2), 5 gold (x3), 3 gold (x4) and 2 gold (x7).

Rattons (12): All are first level Soldiers. They wear no armor, but have a natural A.R. of 6; they are armed with long swords (3D6+5 damage). H.P.: 22 (x5), 20 (x3) and 17 (x4), S.D.C.: 18 (x5), 16 (x3) and 13 (x4). Each has three attacks per melee round; their claws inflict 2D6+5 damage and their bite does 1D6 damage + an additional 1D6 from a non-lethal poison. +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +5 damage, Nightvision 120 feet (36.6 m), swim 60%, track by scent 65% and a Horror Factor of 9.

- 9 have belt pouches. They each contain 1 gold.

The players are also able to discover an additional 223 gold laying in several piles on the floor, where the Soldiers were gambling.

Shrine of Might (Room 49)

This chamber is identical to Room 37.

If a character touches the orb or the altar in this room, he or she will instantly feel full of vitality and strength. As a result, the first character who touches these items gains +2 to their P.S., +3 to their P.E., and +10 Hit Points/S.D.C.

Private Chapel (Room 50)

This chamber is identical to Room 23.

Shrine of Power (Room 51)

This chamber is identical to Room 37.

If a player touches the orb or altar in this room, he or she will instantly feel filled with power and magical energy. As a result, the first spell-caster who touches these items gains +2 to their spell strength and +100 P.P.E. or I.S.P. In addition, the player gains one additional spell every other level of experience.

Master's Chambers (Room 52)

As you enter this rubble strewn chamber, you notice a huge pile of skulls neatly arranged in the center of the room. To your left you see an enormous bed, and against the far wall is a wooden table and a stool. Seated at the desk is a huge Troll dressed in fine red robes, and as you enter he turns around and stares at you with hate-filled eyes.

Rothgar the Mystic: 4th level Troll Wizard. Miscreant alignment. He wears no armor (A.R. 1) and carries no weapons. H.P.: 40, S.D.C.: 44. 14 feet (4.3 m) tall and weighs 643 pounds (289.3 kg). Three attacks per melee round; his claws inflict 2D4+7 damage, his kick does 3D6+7 damage and his bite does 2D6 damage. +7 to save vs Horror Factor, +3 to save vs magic, +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +7 damage and a Horror Factor of 12.

O.C.C. & Natural abilities: Climb/Scale Walls 75%/65%, Ley Line Drifting and Rejuvenation, Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m), Recognize Enchantment 55%, Recognize Magic 40%, See/Use Ley Lines, and Swim 60%.

Skills: Demon & Monster Lore 60%, Magic Lore 65%/55%/50%, Speak Eastern, Elven, Giant and Goblin 98%, and W.P. Blunt (+4 to strike and parry).

Common Knowledge Spells: Cloud of Slumber (1st level/Air), Decipher Magic (1st level), Globe of Daylight (1st level), Sense Magic (1st level) and Tongues (6th level).

Spells: Spell Strength: 14, P.P.E. 175. Befuddle (2nd level), Blinding Flash (1st level), Energy Bolt (3rd level; 4D6 damage), Fear (2nd level), Firebolt (4th level; 5D6 damage) and See the Invisible (1st level).

The Wizard has an invisible wooden chest near the desk. It contains: 1532 gold, and 75 rubies worth 20 gold each.

Ratling Chieftan's Chambers (Room 53)

This room has a bed against the far wall and a wooden stool beside it. As you enter the chamber you notice an odd creature standing near the bed, sharpening a long sword. This creature appears to be a fusion of a Ratton and a Ratling. As he sees you he drops the sharpening stone and prepares himself for battle.

Kergan Iron-fangs: 6th level Ratton/Ratling Soldier. Diabolic alignment. He wears a suit of chain mail (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 44) and is armed with a huge long sword (3D6+6 damage). H.P.: 57, S.D.C.: 50. Four attacks per melee round; his claws inflict 2D6+6 damage and his bite does 2D6 damage. +1 initiative, +4 to strike, parry and dodge, +6 damage. Nightvision 200 feet (61 m), Swim 65%, Climb 75%, Underground Architecture 50%, Underground Sense of Direction 70%/55%, Underground Tunneling 60% and a Horror Factor of 12.

- He has a belt pouch on his person, containing 57 gold.

Under the bed is a small leather bag, which holds 500 gold and a small iron key (which opens the chests in room 54).

Treasury-Armory (Room 54)

This small chamber contains several suits of armor and a large number of weapons which are hanging from wooden racks on the walls. In the far corner, you see two padlocked iron chests.

This room holds 18 spears, 12 pole-axes, 14 lucerne hammers, 17 pikes, 13 halberds, 10 long swords, 4 giant-sized long swords, 12 maces, 3 giant-sized morning-stars, 17 daggers, 8

short swords and 4 war hammers. All of the weapons are of common quality.

There are also 16 suits of scale armor, 15 suits of chain mail armor, 12 suits of soft leather and 5 suits of splint armor.

The first chest contains: 642 gold and 112 small sapphires worth 10 gold each. It also contains a shining gemstone, actually a Crystal of Light, which gives off a small amount of light and will last for at least twenty years.

The second chest contains: 1448 gold, a bundle of magical bandages (which stop blood loss), and a beautiful silver wrist bracer. It is magical and has the following powers:

- Metamorphosis: Hawk (twice per 24 hour period, 30 minute duration).
- Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m) (three times per 24 hour period, 60 minute duration).
- Sense evil (three times per 24 hour period, 8 melee rounds duration).

Hall/Barracks (Room 55)

This large hall contains two long, wooden tables and four benches. Against the far walls are eight bunk-beds piled with dirty sleeping furs. You see fifteen Ratlings seated around the tables eating their meals and drinking ale.

Ratlings (15): All are third level Mercenary Warriors. None are wearing any armor (A.R. 1) and they are armed with daggers (1D6 damage). H.P.: 30 (x6), 28 (x3) and 25 (x6), S.D.C.: 25 (x6), 23 (x3) and 20 (x6). Each has two attacks per melee round. +1 to initiative, strike, parry and dodge. Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), "Passive" Nightvision 1200 feet (366 m), poor day vision 90 feet (27.4 m), keen hearing, sensitive whiskers help to maneuver in the dark or when blind (penalties are halved), Climb 70%, Swim 70%, Imitate Voices 60%, Underground Architecture 35%, Underground Sense of Direction 55%/40%, Underground Tunneling 45%, and a Horror Factor of 11.

- Each has a belt pouch on his person. They contain: 5 gold (x7), 3 gold (x3) and 2 gold (x5).

Second Floor (Rooms 56 - 63)

Use Map III D for this floor.

Great Library (Room 56)

This large chamber's walls are lined with huge, wooden bookcases filled with a large number of ancient tomes and rare volumes. In the room's center stands a large, wooden table surrounded by ten chairs. A double-door leads out onto the rooftop, as do two other wooden doors in the room.

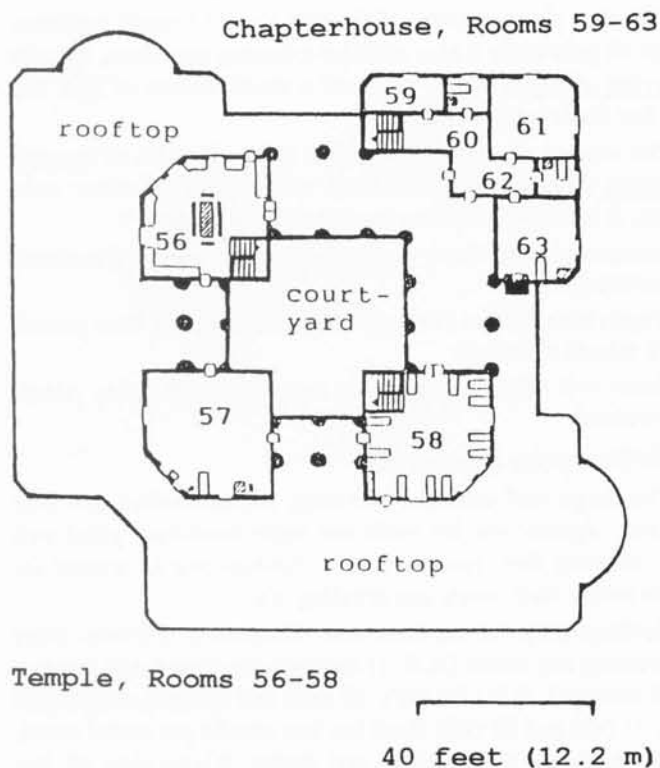
Many of the worn books are of a common origin, however some are valuable works of lost histories or forgotten knowledge, which an Alchemist or other spell-caster would pay dearly for (there are 4 books of ancient and lost histories, 5 books of arcane lore, and 4 books of forgotten lore and knowledge. Each book is well worth 1000 to 2000 gold). In addition, there are 12 parchment maps of various sites in the Palladium world (each is well worth 100 to 500 golds to an alchemist, sage or scholar).

There are also several magic tomes in this chamber; they are:

The Black Tome of Phaldor-Ka: It appears to be a black, rune-covered book with silver clasps. It has the following powers:

Map III D -- The Shrine of Ventax

Second Floor



Temple, Rooms 56-58

- Indestructible. I.Q. 13. Miscreant alignment.
- Inflicts 4D6 points of damage to those not of an evil or self-ish alignment who handle it.
- +50 P.P.E./I.S.P. Can only be used by an evil spell-caster.
- Contains all first level spells, all first level Water spells, and the following spells: Animate & Control Dead (7th level), Compulsion (6th level), Domination (5th level), Fear (2nd level), Hail (4th level/Water), Impervious to Poisons (3rd level), Liquids to Water (2nd level/Water), and Turn Dead (2nd level).
- Speaks to the owner, has all Lore skills 98%, and magically knows all languages.

The Red Book of Elemental Knowledge: It appears to be a red, rune-covered book, with silver clasps. It has the following powers:

- Indestructible. I.Q. 18, M.E. 18. Unprincipled alignment.
- +75 P.P.E./I.S.P. Can only be used by a Warlock!
- Contains all first level Elemental spells (Air, Earth, Fire and Water).
- Speaks to the owner, has all Lore skills 98%, and magically knows all languages.

The White Tome of En mac Ethomain: It appears to be a white, rune-covered book with silver clasps. It has the following powers:

- Indestructible. I.Q. 16. Principled alignment.
- Inflicts 4D6 points of damage to those not of a good alignment who handle it.
- +100 P.P.E./I.S.P. Can only be used by a good spell-caster.
- Contains all first, second and third level spells, as well as the following spells: Cure Illness (6th level), Cure Minor Disor-

ders (4th level), Heal Self (7th level), Heal Wounds (5th level), Exorcism (8th level), Negate Magic (8th level), Sleep (5th level) and Words of Truth (6th level).

- Speaks to the owner, has all Lore skills 98%, and magically knows all languages.

Shrine (Room 57)

This large chamber contains a small stone altar, which stands in front of the windows on the opposite wall. A large bed sits nearby, as well as a small wooden table and a stool. A cloak rack stands between the altar and the bed, with dark clerical robes hanging on it. On the table is a fine pair of gloves and various scattered parchments.

The room is not occupied at the moment. Under the bed is a small sack of diamonds (there are 75 of them, each of which is worth 50 gold), and the sack also holds 158 gold in coins.

The gloves on the desk are actually a pair of magical Gryphon Claws, which have the following powers:

- Indestructible, claws that extend and retract at the user's will
- +10% to climb/scale walls.
- +1 to initiative and to parry.
- Inflict 2D6 +P.S. bonus damage.

Infirmary (Room 58)

This large room holds eleven bunk-beds against the walls. A large wooden cabinet stands near a doorway which opens onto the rooftop. A double-door and another door also open onto the rooftop.

The cabinet contains 39 jars of herbal drugs, each labeled with its name, applications and dosage. They are: 22 jars of Al-Kazin powder (to be mixed with water, each jar holds enough for 5 treatments. It triples the wounded character's healing rate), and 17 jars of Rodoffrin paste (each jar holds enough for 6 applications. It stops blood loss from severe wounds).

The cabinet also holds 81 potions, each of which is also labeled with its effect. They are: 37 All-Purpose Remedies, 17 Healing potions (each restores 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C.), 4 Negate Magic potions (65% effectiveness), 9 Negate Poisons (90% effectiveness), 6 Sleeping potions, and 8 Superior Healing potions (each restores 2D6 Hit points/S.D.C.).

Empty Room (Room 59)

This room is empty and holds nothing of any value.

Apprentice Wizard's Chambers (Room 60)

A large bed sits against the far wall, with a small wooden table and stool nearby. A man dressed in studded leather and armed with a long sword stands near the wall; he turns as you enter and meets your gaze with glowing red eyes.

Ariochar: 2nd level Human Wizard. Diabolic alignment. He wears studded leather (A.R. 13, S.D.C. 38) and is armed with a long sword (2D6 damage). H.P.: 23, S.D.C.: 16. Two attacks per melee round. +4 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to strike, parry and dodge. Ley Line Drifting and Rejuvenation, Recognize Enchantment 45%, Recognize Magic 30%, and See/Use Ley Lines.

Common Knowledge Spells: Cloud of Slumber (1st level/Air), Decipher Magic (1st level), Globe of Daylight (1st level), Sense Magic (1st level) and Tongues (6th level).

Spells: Spell Strength: 11, P.P.E. 165. Blinding Flash (1st level), Fear (2nd level), Thunderclap (1st level), and Weightlessness (2nd level).

Training-Hall (Room 61)

The smells of sulphur, smoke and charred wood fill the air of this ruined chamber. You see the charred, blackened remains of the room's former furnishings, scattered throughout the room amidst odd runes and glyphs drawn on the floor and walls.

There is nothing of any value or worth to be found in this room. The glyphs and runes are not dangerous, they merely confine the magical energy and damage of the Wizards' training to this room alone, so as not to destroy the entire shrine.

Wizard's Chambers (Room 63)

This room contains a large bed which stands against the far wall, with a small wooden table and stool sitting beside it. On the other side of the bed is a large fireplace. There is a tall, dark-haired Elf-maiden dressed in long, blue robes, standing in the center of the room, facing your party as you enter. Without warning a Fireball streaks from her hands towards your party.

Lahnahra the Dark-Mistress: 6th level Elven Fire Warlock. Diabolic alignment. She wears a Cloak of Armor (A.R. 14, S.D.C. 50) and carries a dagger (1D6 damage). I.Q. 18, M.E. 17, M.A. 11, P.S. 13, P.P. 23, P.E. 17, P.B. 26 (Charm/Impress 80%) Spd 13. H.P.: 46, S.D.C.: 19, 6 feet, 3 inches (1.9 m) tall and weighs 193 pounds (86.9 kg). Three attacks per melee round. +5 to strike, +6 to parry and dodge, +2 to save vs Horror Factor (+6 vs Elementals), +2 to save vs magic and +1 to save vs poisons, psionics and possession.

Insanities: She is very sadistic and obsessively hates all males.

O.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Can determine (within 6D6 minutes) how long ago a fire has burned, impervious to fire (magic fire does half-damage), Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), recognize other Warlocks and their Elemental lord, sense air, surface and body temperatures and temperature changes 60%, sense Elementals 55%, sense the presence, direction and distance of fires within a 40 mile (64 km) radius 74%, speak Elemental 92%, and summon Lesser Fire Elementals 30%.

Skills: Demon & Monster Lore 70%, Faerie Folk Lore 65%, Land Navigation 75%, Speak Eastern, Elven, Giant and Goblin 98%, and W.P. Knives (+7 to strike, +9 to parry and +3 to throw).

Spells: Spell Strength: 12, P.P.E. 144. Blinding Flash (1st level/Fire), Blue Flame (5th level/Fire; 6D6 damage), Cloud of Smoke (1st level/Fire), Cloud of Steam (4th level/Fire), Create Heat (3rd level/Fire), Darkness (2nd level/Fire), Extinguish Fire (3rd level/Fire), Fiery Touch (1st level/Fire; 1D6-4D6 damage), Fire Ball (3rd level/Fire; 6D6 damage), Fire Whip (6th level/Fire; 4D6 damage), Flame of Life (6th level/Fire), Freeze Water (2nd level/Fire), Globe of Daylight (1st level/Fire), Heal Burns (4th level/Fire), Mini-Fireballs (4th level/Fire; 3D6 damage), Resist Cold (2nd level/Fire), Swirling Lights (2nd level/Fire) and Wall of Flame (3rd level/Fire).

- She has a belt pouch on her person, containing 143 gold.

Third Floor (Rooms 64 - 66)

Use Map III E for this floor.

Antechamber (Room 64)

As you enter this antechamber, you see a large pair of iron-bound double-doors, and another marble statue of Ventax,

the god of light. As you approach the doors, the face of the statue suddenly becomes animated. Fixing on your party with its intense gaze, it speaks, "Beware, o' children who wouldst enter, for danger lies ahead! Choices two, thou shalt see. Though, one alone, is birthed by me! False or True, choose aright to summon forth my holy blight! If thou shouldst choose your great reward, you'll summon forth the Dark One's horde. Now go, I will await your choice, but beware of the dangers ahead!"

With that said, the face turns to hard marble once more and you are left in silence.

There is nothing of any value or worth to be found in this chamber. This cryptic message is intended to warn of the dangers in rooms 65 and 66, and the choice to be made in Room 66.

Antechamber (Room 65)

This dusty and ruined chamber appears to be empty, but as your party enters the room two things happen simultaneously: you are blasted with a bone-numbing coldness, and then fire begins to erupt from the debris-covered floor!

This chamber is filled with magical wards, but they are not as powerful as they once were, due to the interference of Ventax. There are three invisible wards in here; they are:

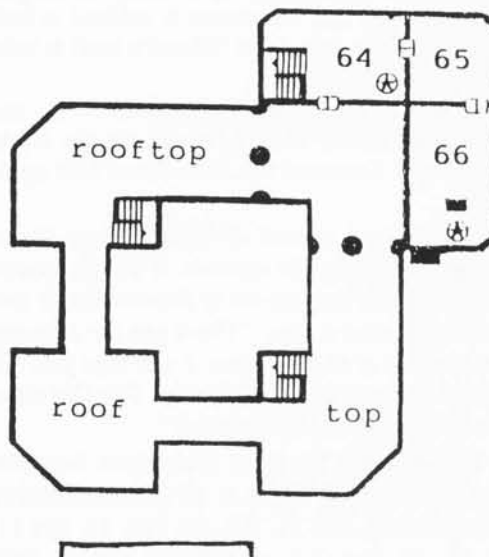
- **Trigger Alarm + Area Effect**, which informs Xammael of the party's presence and allows him to await the summoning in room 66.
- **Inflict + Cold + Area Effect**, which will last for 20 rounds, (5 minutes), inflicting 1D20 points of damage.
- **Inflict + Fire + Area Effect**, which will last for 4 rounds, (1 minute), inflicting 4D6 points of damage every round.

There is nothing else of any value or worth to be found in this chamber.

Map III E -- The Shrine of Ventax

Third Floor

Chapterhouse, Rooms 64-66



40 feet (12.2 m)

Sanctum of the Gemstone (Room 66)

As you enter this dusty and ancient chamber, you see two gemstones which hover in mid-air over a marble altar. They are both identical in size and shape, however one is as black as night and the other pulses with a white light. Behind the altar is another marble statue of Ventax. Once more the face comes to life and speaks, "False or True, choose one not two! There can be no compromise or middle-ground between good and evil!! Choose well, for the fate of this world rests in your hands now!"

As before, the face returns to its inanimate state.

This chamber is encased with strong protective magics, and the players will find that all "true-seeing" and "detect magic" spells, powers, etc. will not work, giving them no help in their choice!

The white gemstone is actually the false gem, whereas the black gemstone is merely an elaborate illusion (it feels quite real). If the black gem is chosen, the statue will once more come to life and say, "Wise choice my daughter! Behold!" At that time, a hidden staircase will be revealed leading to the true sanctum of the gem. Also at this time, Xammael will appear.

The white gemstone appears to be worth a small fortune, and the characters may fall prey to their greed! If anyone touches the white gemstone (or touches it in tandem with the black gemstone), the stone will flash with a blinding light temporarily blinding the characters for one melee round. In addition to this, the stone also has two wards placed invisibly on it; they are:

- **Inflct + Despair + Good + Area Effect**, which will last for 4 rounds (1 minute). The characters affected are 50% likely to surrender without a fight. They are also -2 to strike, parry, dodge, and on initiative, and all skills are reduced by 20%. This will only affect characters of a good alignment!
- **Inflct + Fear + Good + Area Effect**, which will last for 4 rounds (1 minute). The characters affected are 50% likely to run and hide in terror. They are also -2 on initiative, and all skills are reduced by 20%. This will only affect characters of a good alignment!

There are two other items of note in this room; they are:

- **Power Circle: Power Leech** — The mighty power of Ventax keeps this circle functioning; as a result, all magic, including that of Xammael and the players is reduced to half of its normal strength. Thus a 6th level Wizard's spell is only effective as a 3rd level Wizard's!
- **Summoning Circle: Greater Demon or Deevil** — As the result of triggering the Alarm Ward in Room 65, the circle has been activated, and Xammael the Arch-Fiend will spontaneously appear!

With a puff of smoke and a flash of light, a huge figure dressed in a long, dark, hooded robe appears. It wields a mace and chain, which is composed entirely out of flames! Slowly and terribly, it begins to laugh, then it says, "Thank you for allowing me to enter this most holy of shrines. Now I can slay you all, take the gem and free my master, Gath-Gadriel. The Old Ones will return, and it's all thanks to you, ha ha ha!"

Xammael the Dread-Lord: 7th level Arch-Fiend Assassin. Diabolic alignment. I.Q. 20, M.E. 18, M.A. 25 (Trust/Intimidate 84%), P.S. 25 (Supernatural), P.P. 21, P.E. 25, P.B. 14, Spd 31. H.P.: 57, S.D.C.: 51. 15 feet (4.6 m) tall and weighs 1000 pounds (450 kg). Five physical or two magic attacks per melee round; his claws inflict 3D6+10 damage. +3 initiative, +7 to

strike and save vs magic, +5 to parry, dodge and save vs poisons, +2 to save vs psionics, +10 damage, +10 to save vs Horror Factor, and a Horror Factor of 16.

Insanities: Sadistic and perverse. Derives pleasure by causing sorrow!

R.C.C. & Natural Abilities: Bio-regenerates 4D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round, Climb/Scale Walls 90%/85%,



Concealment 65%, Demon & Monster Lore 85%, Dimensional Teleport 85%, Escape Artist 80%, Intelligence 80%, knows all languages, Land Navigation 80%, Locate Secret Compartments/Doors 60%, Metamorphosis at will (human or animal), Nightvision 90 feet (27.4 m), Palming 70%, Pick Locks 80%, Prowl 70%, resistant to fire and cold (does half-damage), see the invisible, Streetwise 70% and Track Humanoids 80%.

- His power to slay with a single word has been disrupted by the power of the Orb of Life, which the Princess now wears!

Spells: Spell Strength: 14, P.P.E. 152. Animate & Control Dead (7th level), Banishment (10th level), Blinding Flash (1st level), Chameleon (2nd level), Circle of Flame (5th level), Cloud of Smoke (1st level), Death Trance (1st level), Decipher Magic (1st level), Escape (5th level), Exorcism (8th level), Fear (2nd level), Fiery Touch (1st level/Fire; 1D6-2D6 damage), Fire Ball (6th level; 4D6 damage), Globe of Daylight (1st level), Heal Wounds (5th level), Increase Weight (1st level), Magic Net (4th level), Multiple Image (4th level), Mystic Portal (10th level), Repel Animals (4th level), See Aura (1st level), Sense Evil/Good (1st level), Sense Magic (1st level), Shadow Meld (4th level), Thunderclap (1st level) and Ventriloquism (1st level).

Armor: None, but he has a natural A.R. of 14.

Weapons: A giant-sized, magical, Flaming Mace & Chain (4D6+10 damage).

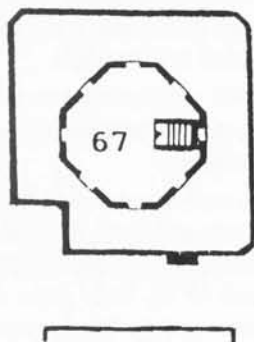
He will seem puzzled and then enraged that his magic isn't as effective as normal, and at the fact that his death phrase doesn't work. He will fight to the end, knowing that he will be eternally tormented by Gath-Gadriel for his failure or retreat!

If the False Gemstone is taken by the more greedy members of the party, they will find that it will turn into dust when the "curse" or "blight of Ventax" is unleashed on the land!

Map III F -- The Shrine of Ventax

Fourth Floor

Chapterhouse, Room 67



40 feet (12.2 m)

Fourth Floor (67)

Use Map III F for this floor.

Inner Sanctum of the Gemstone (Room 67)

As your party ascends the magically hidden staircase and enters the true sanctum, you see a beautiful gemstone which glows with a bright silver-blue light, hovering in mid-air in the center of the chamber. As the Princess nears the stone, it pulses with a comforting glow. As she finally touches it, it flares with a soft yet bright light.

This light will blind all characters of an evil alignment for 1D4 rounds, and will disorient all characters of a selfish alignment for one round, but will not harm characters of a good alignment.

A shining bolt of light disintegrates the roof overhead, and strikes the gemstone, breaking into a thousand rays of light and combining their power with that of the magical gem. A great pillar of light takes shape around the Princess, and suddenly it streaks upward, filling the sky with an intense light as far as the eye can see; the land is shaken and the winds begin to howl with fury! You hear the voice of the god, Ventax, once more. He says, "It is done! I call down my blight upon thee Shadow-Lord and thine unholy allies! Begone forevermore from this land; your existence denies the truth!"

The winds die down and the land grows calm once more, the voice continues. It says, "Though the dead and unholy things have been driven away from this land, you still have a foe to defeat. Now go forth, your uncle awaits thee. Together you must overthrow the usurper and begin your reign. I shall be watching over thee!" At that the voice falls silent, as does the land.

The "curse" or "blight of Ventax" will destroy all undead creatures by turning them into heaps of dust! All demonic creatures will be permanently banished from this kingdom for eternity, forcibly returned to their home dimension! Finally, the powerful influence of the alien intelligence known as Gath-Gadriel has been severed and he will not be able to contact this world again!

Epilogue

Your party continues on, finally arriving in the neighboring kingdom of Aesland. The Princess' uncle, King Taleth, receives her and your party warmly. Taleth vows that together, he and Cyrilla will wage war on Lord Drenath, reclaim her throne and avenge their kinsmen.

Several days later, the people have gathered at the palace for a solemn ceremony. Cyrilla is crowned Queen of Rhiann and you are each presented a silver orb medallion. Each of you are knighted as Champions of Rhiann and Aesland and named the "Companions of the Orb," entitled to the love and respect of both kingdoms.

As your party prepares to continue on, Queen Cyrilla comes and personally rewards each of you with an iron chest holding 2000 gold!

She affectionately hugs each of you and then backs away, appraising each of you with her sharp eyes. Finally, she says, "You know, we could always use more swordarms, as well as wisdom and sorcery. What do you say my friends, will you stay and fight?"



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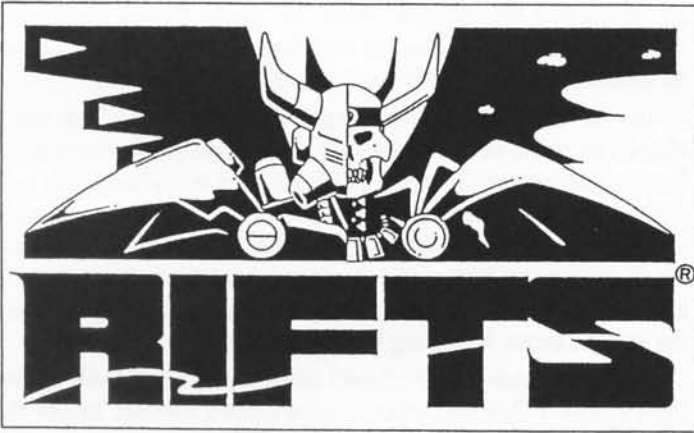
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The Hammer of The Forge

By James M. G. Cannon

Chapter Eleven Freedom

"Come to Dellian-4 and witness the wonders of nanotechnology firsthand! Marvel as reality is reshaped to your every wish, and thousands of nanite machines are at your disposal. On Dellian-4, your fantasies come alive!"

— a Dellian-4 Tourism Bureau advertisement

"Indeed, the entire Consortium of Civilized Worlds has benefited from the nanites invented by the T'Zee of Dellian-4. Sadly, nowhere else in the Three Galaxies is in more desperate need of that miracle technology than its birthplace itself. Twenty-five billion sentients call Dellian-4 home, crammed into a living space that should only provide room for a quarter of that number. The ecosystem no longer exists, as virtually every living thing on the planet has been rendered extinct save for the T'Zee themselves. Even their oxygen is manufactured artificially, since there isn't enough plant life on the world. The seas, shallow and acidic, have been plundered as well. Massive undersea arcologies are spreading across the ocean floor at an almost geometric rate. In another generation, perhaps two, all of Dellian-4 will be one massive city.

"This is a crisis waiting to happen. In an environment such as this, appalling abuses of power are common. The T'Zee punish over ninety percent of their crimes with the death penalty. Every day, a hundred thousand T'Zee die of starvation. The wealth and resources of the planet are held by a handful, while the rest are forced to eke out meager lives, rarely earning enough to get off-world to find a better life. But what is perhaps most distressing is that the rest of the CCW tolerates all of this."

— "Malthus' World," trideo documentary

Six more T'Zee died in a blaze of actinic light as Quajinn Huo's lightning washed over them. Above the thunderous after-

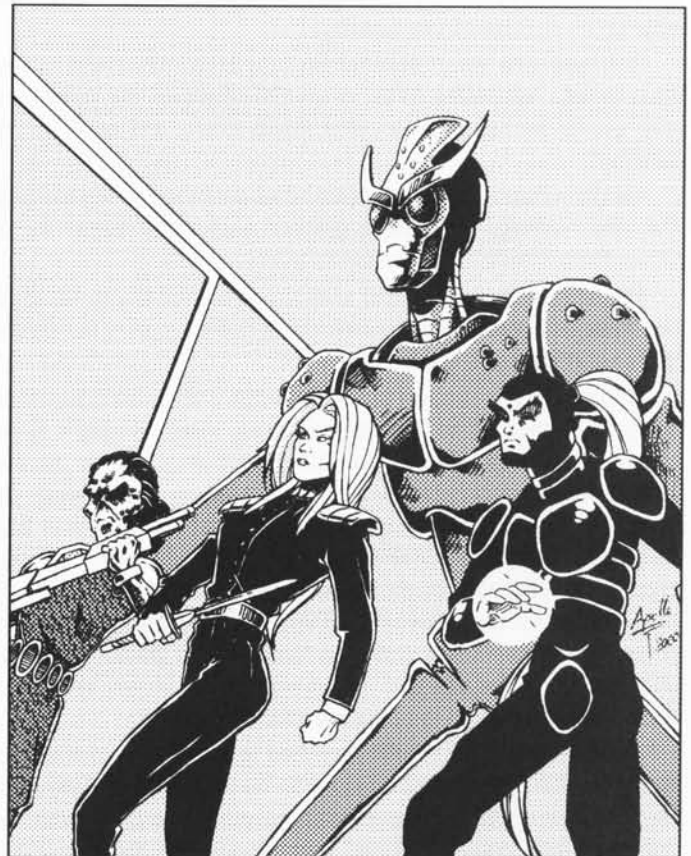
shock of the magic bolt, Elias Harkonnen could hear Huo's cackling laugh. The three T'Zee who had escaped Huo's assault ducked into an adjoining corridor, screaming in their high-pitched voices. Harkonnen chuckled and strode forward, boot heels clicking on the polished floor of the corridor.

Behind him, Friar the Klikita, her breath frosting in the aura of cold air she manifested around herself, used her abilities to erect a wall of ice to deter pursuit. Tatsuda, the Oni martial artist, stood nearby, his violet skin flushed with exertion, and his hands humming with barely restrained power. Bark-faced Orix, his leafy hair tied back into a ponytail, followed at Harkonnen's left, casually reloading his grav rail gun. The nine foot insectoid Hector, cradling a plasma ejector in his spindly limbs, hopped forward to stand beside the hovering Quajinn Huo in the center of the corridor.

Hector's antennae flickered on his domed forehead like nervous fingers. "The three are retreating at a rapid pace, but another squad of T'Zee are bringing up something big from that direction. Probably a cannon."

Quajinn Huo cackled again. "Let them come. None may stand before Quajinn Huo, Scourge of the Three Galaxies."

Harkonnen suppressed a sigh. He was beginning to regret bringing the Draconid sorcerer on this caper. Since escaping the curse that bound him to Center, the hub of the Three Galaxies, Quajinn Huo had grown more insufferable with each passing day. He had ruled an empire, Huo was fond of reminding them all, and he would not take orders from an Elf. Several times Harkonnen had been tempted to bash in the Draconid's skull, but he had resisted it. He needed Huo's considerable magical might to deal with the Cosmo-Knight Lothar of Motherhome. Further, Harkonnen had to admit that Huo's skills came in very handy in their current enterprise.



Thraxus of Center, one of the richest and most corrupt sentiments in the Three Galaxies, had hired Harkonnen and his band to sabotage the food production facilities on Dellian-4. There were seven such facilities on the planet; massive, kilometer long factories that used nanotechnology to manufacture foodstuffs for the planet's burgeoning population. Organic material, shipped from off-world or recycled from native garbage and detritus, was transformed by nanite machines and then shipped all over the globe to feed the lower classes. The leaders of the T'Zee society, the so called "Captains of Industry," could afford better, of course. They probably wouldn't starve to death after Harkonnen destroyed all seven facilities.

They would die in the riots that followed, Harkonnen smiled grimly. The miracle nanotechnology of the T'Zee would be able to rebuild the facilities in record time; months instead of years, but the nanites wouldn't be able to feed twenty-five billion T'Zee for that amount of time.

This was their second raid. Already the T'Zorrian Kal Facility of the Southern Mek'loris Province was destroyed, burned from within by nuclear fire, its mighty engines destroyed and even its raw organic material contaminated by radiation. Immediately after setting the timer on the explosive left there, Harkonnen's team had teleported across the continent to the T'Zall Fvish Facility of the Northern Mek'loris Province, whisked there by the magic of Quajinn Huo. The T'Zee, reeling from the destruction of T'Zorrian Kal, were not yet prepared for a second raid on another facility, not so soon after the last. The security at T'Zall Fvish was not lax, but they were hardly more prepared than the defenses at T'Zorrian Kal had been.

That would change, further along, but the plan was a good one. Lightning fast strikes at each facility, followed by a quick magical escape to the next one. For all the aggravation Huo gave Harkonnen, the Elf had to admit that the mage was invaluable to the success of the mission.

"I'll take this one," Harkonnen told Huo. "The rest of you keep going. According to the plans Orix hacked, the power station should be only a few more levels down. I'll be with you shortly."

Quajinn Huo arched one pencil thin eyebrow, as if to object, but said nothing. The others grunted assent and began to jog down the corridor, weapons at the ready.

Harkonnen himself, gifted with the power of flight, lifted off the floor and sped down the branching hallway, after the fleeing T'Zee and Hector's "cannon."

He found them in short order. A dozen T'Zee, including what Harkonnen took to be the missing three, were piloting a hover cannon at medium speed down the passageway. About the size of a small hover car, the cannon wasn't much of a vehicle, despite the way the T'Zee squad clinged to its sides. It was little more than a weapon barrel and power source mounted on a grav sled, and it packed enough firepower to vaporize any living target. Besides the gun's power, the dozen T'Zee scampering along it like monkeys were armed with their piranha guns, pistols that shot blobs of nanites that swarmed over a target, devouring flesh, metal, or any other substance they contacted.

Any normal being would have fled in terror from the massed firepower the T'Zee were bringing to bear. But Elias Harkonnen was not normal. He had never been normal, even before the biotechnological process that had transformed him from an Elf to

an Invincible Guardsman. Now he could fly at supersonic speeds, possessed the strength and fortitude of a god, and had so far proven invulnerable to every attack laid against him.

Instead of running, then, he sped up. Before the T'Zee had a chance to react, he slammed into their hover cannon at several hundred kilometers an hour, his body burning through the machine like a laser beam. He exploded out the other side and rocketed down the corridor. Behind him, the hover cannon detonated, taking the T'Zee squad and much of the hallway with it. Harkonnen drew to a halt and then spun around, hurrying back the way he came, following his team.

He found them in a T shaped corridor, facing a bank of elevators. The T'Zee had erected a haphazard defense before the elevators. A security station provided minimal cover, but enough for the short, slim T'Zee to use. Another cannon hovered nearby, powering up for a second blast; one energy beam had already vaporized Hector.

Orix pinned down the T'Zee at the security station with a burst of Kisentite bullets that were beginning to shred the circular durasteel desk. Huo and Friar focused their energies on the cannon; Huo lobbed an energy bolt at the gunner, protected by an energy screen, while Friar was forming ice along the cannon's muzzle. Tatsuda stood nearby, useless in the firefight and eyeing the scorched patch of ground that used to be Hector.

As Harkonnen flew into the room, Orix succeeded in blasting the security station to pieces, blowing apart the T'Zee huddling inside. The cannon was beginning to tip forward as several metric tons of ice formed on its barrel. Harkonnen buzzed past Huo and into the cannon itself, using his momentum to finish the movement begun by Friar; in a heartbeat the cannon tumbled onto its side, spilling the gunner on the ground. As the T'Zee frantically tried to draw his pistol, Harkonnen casually crushed his skull.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Harkonnen asked.

Tatsuda gestured at Hector's remains. "He's dead again. I told him to keep his head down, but the fool won't listen."

"He thinks he's invulnerable," Huo said softly.

Harkonnen looked at the Draconid sharply, but Huo just smiled enigmatically.

Orix jammed a fresh clip home into his oversized gun, and then slung it across his back. He loped over to the shredded security station, and shifted debris with his boot. "I was hoping to patch into their system from here, but the little uglies didn't give me much of a chance." He went to check the elevators instead.

There was a loud pop as Hector's molecules reformed two feet away from where he had died. He staggered for a moment. "Whoah," he said. "That was a doozy. Remind me to duck next time." He reached down and picked up his still intact plasma ejector, clucking in disappointment at the shape of the rest of his weaponry.

"Huo," Harkonnen said, "pull another set of gear from the ship for Hector. And Hector, stop taking stupid chances. You Relogians may have nine lives, but you've already lost two of them today. I'd be more careful if I were you."

Hector just shrugged. "I've got five left," he grumbled.

Huo stretched his hand into the air, folding space and time by force of will, and his hand disappeared, as if reaching into a hidden pocket hanging into the air. He pulled his arm back, and a

heavy pack bristling with weaponry appeared in his hand. He casually tossed the pack to Hector, who caught it with a loud "oof."

"Orix," Harkonnen called. "Tell me some good news."

"These will get us down to the power station level, and only a few meters from the front door. If the plans were correct."

"They haven't been wrong so far," Friar offered. She sealed off the adjoining corridors with a thick wall of ice as she spoke.

"Well then," Harkonnen said. "Let's go."

* * *

The *Vigilance*, a crab-shaped scout ship of the S'hree Vek Confederacy, orbited the gas giant Garouk-9, hiding its damaged body within the planet's icesteroid rings. Having just barely survived an altercation with a Consortium Warshield cruiser, the *Vigilance* hoped to hide in the shadows of the gas giant while it effected repairs.

Lor Koushak Dail, Commissar of the *Vigilance*, floated in her tank of virium in the center of the bridge, her lip tentacles playing over the keys of the computer ringing the tank's base. Her ship was badly damaged, her crew uncertain, and her most powerful servants, the winged Celestines, were distrustful of her command skill. She had to admit — to herself alone, of course — that the leader of the Celestines, Joriel, had reason to be dissatisfied with her.

The *Vigilance* was her first command, and she had led them into an ambush. The Consortium craft had nearly destroyed them, and only a frantic and desperate psi-jump had saved her crew. Now she was drained of energy, unable to supply the faster-than-light engines of the *Vigilance* with the psionic energy of her six-lobed brain so that they could escape from Consortium space, back to the relative safety of a S'hree Vek system.

Rest and meditation would bring her strength back, but she couldn't spare the time. Officially she did so in order to oversee the repairs the Tooranimoor engineers were making, but privately she was afraid to return to the Confederacy empty handed, with her ship badly damaged. She was a royal of the House Koushak, and that status had given her a command post when, perhaps, she was not yet ready for it. She couldn't allow her family's enemies to learn of her transgression ... her failure ... without bringing something worth saving back to the Confederacy.

As luck would have it, a routine scan of the rings had picked up an interesting anomaly and she had sent the Celestines to investigate. They returned with a bizarre humanoid in tow, a figure who appeared to be composed entirely of shadows, yet possessed the warmth and solidity of a living being. That the figure could retain that warmth in the cold vacuum of space was also surprising, and Lor Koushak Dail began to believe that there might be a profit made from this venture after all.

At the moment, the stranger rested in the Commissar's quarters, an honor guard of Celestines keeping watch over his unconscious form. Joriel was instructed to alert her if the stranger showed any sign of regaining awareness.

As if bidden, her console lit up with Joriel's signal. The Commissar's lip tentacles quivered in anticipation. <Second,

you have the bridge. I will be in my quarters.> she commanded with her mental voice, and the blue-faced, horn-headed Haakon second, Vor Jeffrik, snapped to attention beside her tank. Her elongated body twisted in the virium, and her powerful tale pumped twice, propelling her upward into the virium filled tunnel that gave her access to the rest of the ship.

In moments, she arrived in her quarters, a spartan room dominated by a much larger virium tank. Along the tank's bottom were her belongings, carefully ordered and organized files, tech, and keepsakes, each in their proper place.

A divan was erected outside the tank, along which rested the shadow person. Not far from it stood two Celestines. They were ugly creatures, modeled after the bipeds who dominated the Consortium of Civilized Worlds, the humans. S'hree Vek technology and ingenuity had improved on the basic human design, naturally. The Celestines were bio-mechanical androids, stronger, faster, and more lethal than a battalion of CCW marines, their artificial bodies packed with sensors, weapons, and other toys. Each Celestine sported a pair of feathery wings that erupted from their shoulders, the maroon of the feathers matching the shade of their hair and eyes perfectly. Although the Celestines actually flew through the use of internal gravitonic devices, the wings gave them the appearance of fearsome creatures from human mythology, an image that was only enhanced when they summoned their blazers, swords of psionic fire. Few beings in the Three Galaxies could stand up to a Celestine assault, but the shadow being did not fit the description of any known species in the databanks, so the Commissar had stationed two of the androids to watch over it.

<Report, Joriel,> Lor Koushak Dail commanded.

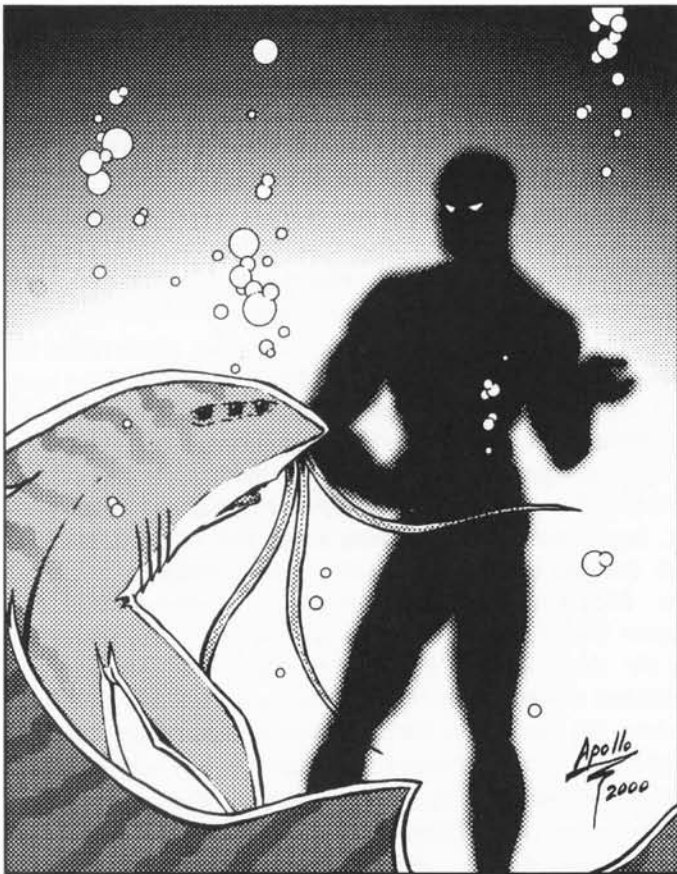
The male Celestine stepped forward. "The shadow achieved consciousness but a moment ago, Commissar. We alerted you immediately."

<What did it do?>

"I can speak for meself, you bloody great fish," the shadowy figure said, rising from its seat. The Commissar noted that the figure was featureless, save for two orange lights that might have been eyes. The Commissar locked two of her own orbs on the shadow and focused the other six on Joriel and Kariel, the Celestines. Neither had made any noticeable shift in stance or posture, and yet at a glance she knew they were ready to strike the shadow down at any sign of hostility.

<Then speak, sentient,> Lor Koushak Dail told the shadow. <Who are you, and how did you end up floating in the void?>

The orange eyes surveyed Joriel and Kariel as well. "Y'seem to have the upper hand at the moment, luv, so I'll play along," the shadow said after a moment. "I am Hazmat of the Shaar Continuum. I'm no native of your Three Galaxies. The Continuum sent me along to bring back one of our own, missing in this corner of the Megaverse for a bloody great while. As luck would have it, upon arriving in this reality I found meself in the hands of a psychotic fellow with pointy ears and too many teeth. But things went south for him and he blew his little fortress up. I escaped, of course, but barely, and had to float around in this bloody asteroid field for the Continuum knows how long. Eventually I had to shut down me bodily functions or risk derezzing. I suppose that's when your angels found me."



<Interesting,> the Commissar said. She only understood about half of what the figure said. He spoke Galactic Trade Four with an exotic accent. She reached out with her senses, attempting to probe the strange man, but her powers were blocked by a wall. Her lip tentacles quivered in surprise and frustration.

The shadowy figure's orange eyes twinkled. "I wouldn't try that again, luv. I may look harmless, but I'm far from it. Now then, I owe ya something for your trouble. And what's more, I need yer help if I'm to get anywhere looking for that missing man. So I'll offer you the same deal I offered ol' pointy ears. He refused, but I've a feeling you'll be wanting to think it over."

The Commissar ignored the sneer on Joriel's humanoid features. <Go on, Hazmat of the Shaar,> she prompted. <We will entertain whatever you have to offer.>

Hazmat nodded. "The Continuum has pan-dimensional resources. We're a bit spread thin these days, which is why a fellow like me gets a job like this, but I can promise you a healthy reward in return for yer help."

<What kind of reward?> the Commissar asked.

The eyes were twinkling again. "Well, besides the requisite material rewards of precious materials, there is also the possibility of arcane knowledge to be had. As I mentioned, we're a pan-dimensional organization. We know lots of things that other folks want t'know."

The Commissar eyed her guest warily. It was worth a try, she thought. <We would require some sort of demonstration first,> she said.

"If you can set me down on the ground of a living planet, so I can recharge me batteries as it were, I can show you what I mean."

<That can be arranged,> the Commissar agreed. She turned

her attention to Joriel. <Show Lor Hazmat to suitable quarters,> she ordered. <I will confer with the bridge, and then I am not to be disturbed for any reason.>

Joriel nodded perfunctorily and took Hazmat by the elbow to escort him from the room. As he did so, Lor Koushak Dail keyed her comm with one tentacle, and with another opened a cask at the bottom of her tank and began to pull out her meditation disk.

* * *

Aboard Lothar's borrowed freighter, the mood was tense. Since leaving Phase World and engaging the phase drive, making the shift from normal speed to faster-than-light, Lothar had uttered little save the occasional disgusted grunt. Doctor Abbot, clad as always in trench coat and fedora, played with his cane, his shadowy features darker than usual. Kassiopaea Acherean, Atlantean Undead Slayer, pored over the computer display before her, occasionally hitting buttons but not saying much.

In the co-pilot seat sat Caleb Vulcan, newly minted Knight of the Forge. He understood why everyone else felt edgy, and actually found the feeling contagious. After tracking a fugitive named Elias Harkonnen to Phase World, they had discovered Harkonnen had left the planet with a strike force in his employ, loaded for bear, and further, that he had freed a deadly galactic despot from a curse placed upon him by Lothar himself. Unsure of Harkonnen's ultimate destination, they had used what meager clues they found on Phase World to decide he was heading for the small world of Dellian-4. There were literally millions of worlds for Harkonnen to choose to practice his villainy, but with the limited information at their disposal, and the tiny time frame they were allowed, the Cosmo-Knights and their allies were forced to play Abbot's hunch. Their informer on Phase World had mentioned a "riot," and Harkonnen's escape trajectory from the planet's surface pointed him in a straight line to the T'Zee homeworld.

They might already be too late to make a difference. But if they arrived at Dellian-4 and discovered nothing amiss, they might lose their chance to stop Harkonnen from committing an unconscionable evil. Harkonnen's ship's manifest, obtained from the Promethean authorities of Phase World, had listed ten nuclear devices on board.

Caleb was reassured that his more erudite and well traveled friends had been as horrified as he to learn what Harkonnen was carrying. On Caleb's homeworld of Earth, somewhere outside the Three Galaxies, his generation was raised under the threat of nuclear holocaust. His father, a career military man, had seen the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki firsthand, only weeks after the bombings. It was not something his father liked to recall, and Caleb had grown up fearing nuclear war more than most people his age; especially the year that he had left Earth. American soldiers fought communism in Vietnam, provoking Soviet aggression, while Soviet tanks drove through the streets of Prague, threatening civilians. Thinking of it now, Caleb felt guilty that he had left it behind. With all the power at his disposal as a Cosmo-Knight, he could make a real and lasting difference on Earth. For that matter, bringing proof of other intelligent beings back to Earth might make people wise up and ignore the differences among them, to present a united human front to the aliens.

Kassy interrupted Caleb's reverie. "Caleb, what do you know of the T'Zee?" she asked, tapping him on the shoulder.

Caleb started, and then spun his chair around to face her. "Not much," he admitted. "Just what you and Lothar mentioned before, that the planet is overpopulated and that Harkonnen could spark a war if we don't stop him."

"A definite possibility," Kassy admitted. "The T'Zee have managed to perfect nanotechnology," she explained, "creating microscopic machines that can reshape their environment. A number of Consortium civilizations have attempted to do the same thing, but none of them have achieved the success of the T'Zee. This has made the T'Zee very rich and very powerful, and it has led to some horrid policy decisions by the CCW. To keep the Kreeghor, Naruni, or S'hree Vek from getting their hands on the T'Zee technology, the CCW allowed Dellian-4 entry into the Consortium despite flagrant and abusive sentient-rights abuses. To this day, Dellian-4 is the only planet in the Consortium upon which people still starve to death."

Caleb nodded. He realized he came from a backward, savage world where people also continued to die of starvation, but he knew that the advances in technology and culture possessed by the civilizations of the Three Galaxies should have made that possibility remote in the extreme. "But the Three Galaxies are huge," he protested. "Why doesn't everybody relocate offworld, and spread out the resources?"

"Poverty," Abbot said, chiming in, his upper-class British accent hardly bothering Caleb any longer. "Nanotech has made a few T'Zee very wealthy. Most of the twenty-five billion sentients who call the planet home live in squalor. A few hundred thousand die a day. But with the high T'Zee birth rate, several times that number are also born in the same span of time. The CCW has tried shipping people offworld, but they haven't had much success. The T'Zee as a people have a reputation for cruelty, underhandedness, and disloyalty. That, combined with the possibility that they could outbreed native species, keeps planets from accepting many T'Zee immigrants. Sadly, few T'Zee seem to possess the drive to found colonies of their own." Abbot sighed. "The whole situation is a galactic mess. And Harkonnen complicates matters considerably."

"If that's his destination," Lothar growled, finally breaking his long silence. Everyone stared at him. He growled again. "I've been thinking about what Thraxus has to gain from all this," he said. "The obvious threat of military conflict can't be ignored. Consortium Armed Forces are spread pretty thinly across CCW space; pulling in enough ships to provide aid and protection to Malthus' World could weaken the borders with the Kreeghor or the S'hree Vek. If that's the case, Thraxus could make a great deal of cash selling munitions to the border systems, or other contested spots — there are a lot of Warshields patrolling the Goruda system, for example. But what if Thraxus isn't looking for a war? He could clean up selling food and medical supplies to Dellian-4. Or he might have more ... political reasons for sending Harkonnen."

"What do you mean?" Abbot prompted.

"You said it yourself. Dellian-4 is a big embarrassment to the CCW. What if Thraxus is doing them a favor, cleaning up their mess for them?"

"Lothar," Kassy said, "that's ridiculous!"

Caleb had to agree. "I thought the CCW was the good guys," he said.

Lothar shook his head. "Mostly, pup, that's true. You'd be hard pressed to find a more egalitarian society in the Three Galaxies. But keep in mind there are Wolfen and Kamnions in the CCW, and due to external threats like the Kreeghor and the Splugorth, the Consortium Armed Forces has a lot of power. They can be ruthless when they need to be, and corruption has reared its ugly head on occasion. Abbot and Kassy remember the Admiral Rothschild debacle."

"Regardless," Abbot interjected. "You haven't a shred of proof."

"True," Lothar admitted. "But that doesn't keep me from speculating. And there's not much else to do while this slow ship burns photons."

"We should work on an attack plan," Kassy said. "It will help keep your imagination in check." Lothar snorted. Kassy ignored him, keying something on her terminal. "Now, besides Harkonnen himself, there's a good chance we'll have to deal with Quajinn Huo. That's bad. Worse, Harkonnen has assembled a formidable little team to help him. The foursome he has would have been arrested in just about any port besides Phase World, which is saying a lot.

"First, a Relogian weapons expert named Hector. He's wanted in at least a dozen systems for assassination, terrorism, and assorted acts of violence. He was tried and convicted once; the sentence was execution. But like all Relogians, he has a weird ability to cheat death. Since he was convicted in CCW space, they had to settle for the one execution and were forced to let him go. Too bad he didn't get caught by the Kreeghor.

"Next is a Kisent pilot and computer expert called Orix. Even by Kisent standards he's a monster. Hard as Kisentite steel and twice as deadly. He's served in a dozen militias the Three Galaxies over, piloting everything from Fire-eaters to Katana starfighters. I don't know how good he is on the ground, but he's definitely an ace pilot. Has over a hundred confirmed kills.

"There is also an Oni by the name Tatsuda. Not much on him, so I did a little digging. Your ship has some extensive and esoteric files, Lothar. The Bushi Federation is very interested in Tatsuda, in particular a group known as the White Lotus. Tatsuda used to work for them, but now he's on his own; in short he's a renegade shadow warrior, trained in the arts of espionage and assassination. He's most deadly when he's unarmed, Caleb, so watch him.

"The one to watch most closely, however, is the last one. A Klikita named Friar, who has manifested the Klikita gene for cold manipulation. Fairly common for someone raised on an ice planet like the Klikita homeworld. She made a name for herself in the border wars with her planet's other native sentients, the Aluta, but branched out into terrorism and work as a gun for hire. She's a slippery one, and has managed to evade capture by various authorities on twelve separate occasions. She's a demon with her ice powers.

"So, what's the plan?"

Lothar cleared his throat. "Abbot and I will engage Harkonnen and Huo. The rest will be up to you and Caleb." He eyed the two of them. "This is very important, so listen carefully. Neither of you is to attempt to handle Huo or Harkonnen.

Leave them to us. That is not to denigrate your abilities Kassy, but those two will be too much for you. And Caleb ... I wish we had more time to train you before rushing into a dangerous situation like this."

"I'm not a 'pup,' despite what you think," Caleb told him. "I can handle this. I took out the Zodoran energy leech, didn't I?"

Lothar nodded. "Indeed, but that was a machine, however deadly. How will you do against the living? If you have to kill one of them, what will you do? Kassy and Abbot I can count on; we've fought together in the past. I can trust them to do the right thing. But you're untried, Caleb. Neither you nor I know exactly how you'll do until we're in the midst of the battle."

Caleb flushed. "I'll do my duty," he said.

"I'm sure you will," Lothar agreed. "But will that be enough?"

"Lothar," Abbot interjected, "you're too hard on the boy. He'll do fine. There is a distinct possibility we can resolve this situation without resorting to lethal force."

Lothar snorted. "I hope so, Abbot. But I fear we won't have the chance. If Huo is alive and aiding them, we will need to strike fast and hard or else we won't survive, let alone persevere. Harkonnen won't be pulling any punches, but if Huo is there, we have no real counter. Dealing with him and the others will take every resource at our disposal. Remember the battle of the Draconid Hub, Abbot? We had Koguk, Callista, and a fleet of ships at our backs and Huo still almost managed to defeat us. As it was, he got away."

"And we may have to let him do so again," Abbot told his friend. "A wise sentient once told me, 'The important thing to do is save lives. The rest comes later.' I'm afraid your passion for Huo may be getting the better of you."

Lothar grinned ruefully. "This is why I can never keep you around for long. You're always throwing my words back at me." He sighed. "The first thing we do is disarm those bombs of theirs. Without those, they're much less of a threat. That still doesn't change the order of battle, however. Kassy and Caleb, you're dealing with the henchmen. See what you can do about the nuclear weapons. Abbot and I will keep Huo and Harkonnen busy."

"Now that," Kassy said, "sounds like a plan."

Caleb felt a great deal of relief at Lothar's change of attitude. He had meant what he said; he would do his duty. But he really didn't want his duty to include killing anyone. It had never been one of his life's goals after all; even with a career military father, Caleb had declined to join the army. So they had drafted him. The Cosmic Forge granted him a reprieve, summoning him to the Three Galaxies to serve as one of its representatives. But he couldn't imagine the kind face of the Forge demanding an execution, or ordering Caleb to kill for it.

Maybe someday he would be faced with the choice. Maybe he would face it in a few hours, trading blows against Harkonnen and Huo, but Caleb hoped he could save the day without anyone dying. Bad guys, good guys, or the innocent T'Zee trapped in between.

His eyes were suddenly drawn to his console, where a red blinking light flickered. "There's a message coming in," he announced, keying the comm.

A high-pitched voice in an alien tongue began to chatter, and it took a long moment for the ship's translator to kick in. "Attention all sentients, this is a distress call from Dellian-4. Our food production facilities are under attack, and all attempts at repulsion have failed. Two of our largest facilities lie in ruins, and we fear more will follow. The militia has failed. We require assistance. Attention all sentients..." The message continued to play, and Caleb keyed the sound off.

"Looks like Abbot's guess was an accurate one," he said softly.

"Part of me wishes I had been incorrect," Abbot said.

"Caleb," Lothar said, "send Dellian-4 a message. Let them know we're coming, and that we'll be there within the hour. They should be able to hold off Harkonnen that long, at least."

"Aye, aye, Captain," said Caleb.



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