

The Palladium Fantasy RPG® – Celebrating 30 Years of Adventure

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE

# RIFTS®

Your Guide to the Megaverse®

*Inside this Issue...*

Dead Reign™ source material

Nightbane® source material

Rifts® Coalition Psi-Battalion

Palladium Fantasy® – Adventure

Palladium Fantasy® – Monsters

Short stories, news, & more.

# Warning!

## Violence and the Supernatural

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

Some parents may find the violence, magic and supernatural elements of the games 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 64**

**Your Guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!**

## Special Palladium Fantasy® 30th Anniversary Dedication:

**To Erick Wujcik**, who helped me find myself as a writer and game designer. I miss our long talks about everything and anything, especially our discussions about games and ideas.

**To Kay Kozora**, for believing in a snot-nosed kid and supporting his dream of publishing and game design, and for putting up with me and all of Erick's wacky gaming pals. We miss you.

**And in memory of my beautiful mother**, who passed away much too young. You were my Mom and my friend, and wise beyond reason.

My thanks and love to you all, and so many others, who have helped shape me into the man I am today. *Kathy*, I love you most of all.

– Kevin Siembieda, November, 2013

## First Printing – November 2013

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**Palladium Books® Presents:**

# THE RIFTER® #64



**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** Matthew Clements and all our contributors, writers and artists. Our apologies to anybody who may have gotten accidentally left out or their name misspelled.

– *Kevin Siembieda, 2013*

# Contents – The Rifter® #64 – Autumn, 2013

## Page 6 Art

Artist Mike Mumah presents this Christmas inspired missive depicting his dramatic recovery from a severe stroke last Christmas. You can read about it on page 8 in the Palladium News section. In fact, you can see some of his latest art in this very issue. Merry Christmas, Mike; glad your awesomeness lives on. Keep drawing.

## Page 7 – From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Publisher Kevin Siembieda addresses several subjects, from this being another very late issue (our apologies) to Halloween and Thanksgiving, to Christmas, loved ones and losing those we care about. Editor Alex Marciniszyn found it all rather uplifting. We hope you do too. Happy Holidays from all of us at Palladium Books.

## Page 8 – Palladium News

This issue's news talks about Mike Mumah getting back in the saddle of drawing artwork, Palladium's need for Gamer Masters to run Palladium gaming events at the **2014 Gen Con Indy** and how we need those games submitted by January 15, our **Detroit Fanfare** report, confirmation of a **Palladium Open House in 2015**, and the latest on new game releases. All of that, yet somehow Kevin forgot to mention the new **Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 4: Fear the Reaper™** is hot off the presses and available NOW! Don't miss it.

## Page 10 – Coming Attractions

New books are finally being released, with **Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 4: Fear the Reaper™** and the long-awaited **Rifts® Northern Gun™ One** both available now. Coming soon: **Northern Gun™ Two**, **Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames™**, **Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook**, **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**, and more. Plus we remind you about some other cool 2014 releases.

## Page 16 – 2013 Christmas Surprise Package

Here are all the details on Palladium Books' annual Christmas Surprise Package, made with autographs and love. Read all about it and place your order today! Oh, and tell your friends. Game on and happy holidays from all of us at Palladium Books.

## Page 18 Tinkers

### – Optional source material for the Nightbane® RPG

Bryant Telfer takes a look at the Nightbane, past and present, and how many were gypsy-like wanderers throughout the ages.

Page 19 – Life in the Tinker Family

Page 20 – The Tarish Order

Page 20 – Campaign & Role-Playing Notes

Page 21 – Tinker Related Skills

Page 22 – Tinker Con Artist O.C.C.

Artwork by *Benjamin Rodriguez*.

## Page 25 – Gleaners

### – Official material for Beyond the Supernatural™

Once a year, just in time for All Hallows Eve, the child-snatching Gleaner appears. This wicked monstrosity enslaves as many children as it can to whisk away to its dark dimension, where they are tormented and it devours them. Unless found and slain before midnight on All Saints Day, the Gleaner will vanish, only to return Halloween after Halloween. A dramatic Halloween adventure and gruesome BTS monster written by Matthew Clements, based on concepts by Kevin Siembieda.

## Page 29 – New Dead Reign™ Survivors

### – Optional material for the Dead Reign™ RPG

*Jeff Duncan* presents eight new Survivor Occupations for your inclusion in the **Dead Reign™** setting. Kevin Siembieda loved them and endorses them wholeheartedly.

Page 29 – Professional Athlete

Page 31 – Cycle Courier

Page 31 – Game Designer/Novelist

Page 32 – Gunsmith

Page 32 – Hook, Line & Sinker Adventures

Artwork by *Tanya J. Ramsey*.

## Page 35 – a Day in the Life of Scott Benter, G.A.

### – A short story for Heroes Unlimited™

Regular contributor, *Glen Evans*, give us an unusual look into the world of superhumans.

Artwork by *Jeffrey A. Burke*.

## Page 48 – Palladium Ice Dwellers

### – Official source material for the Palladium Fantasy RPG® & Rifts®

This year was the Palladium Fantasy RPG's 30th Anniversary, so we have made sure every 2013 issue of **The Rifter®** had some Fantasy art and source material dedicated to it. Here are some 'official' monsters you should enjoy. **The Ice Bearmen** are even more feral and barbaric than their brown Bearman of the North cousins, and the **Winterserpent** is a cousin to the Ice Dragon with a few special abilities and an affinity for Bearmen. Concepts by Kevin Siembieda and Chuck Walton.

Written by Matthew Clements. Artwork by *Charles Walton*.

## Page 52 – Too Big to Fail

### – An Optional Giant adventure

### for the Palladium Fantasy RPG®

*Michael Osborne* present a unique Fantasy adventure that can be undertaken by Giant Player Characters or pint-sized human ones. Embark on a quest that involves ancient secrets, dark magic and undead Trolls!

Page 57 – The False Rune Forge  
Page 60 – Average Possessed Troll  
Artwork by *Benjamin Rodriguez*.

## Page 65 – A Cold Night, Dead Past

### – A short story for Rifts®

Writer *Brett Caron* delivers a chilling story of Coalition tenacity, bad choices and danger.

Artwork by *Charles Walton*.

## Page 80 – The Black-Malice Legacy, Part Two

### – Optional source material for Rifts®

*Matt Olfson*, with contributions from Will Hunter and Kevin Siembieda, presents the little known and dark underside of the Coalition Army's special forces in *Psi-Battalion*. This chapter presents what the author calls "The Black Arts." Psychic Registration and training programs that groom CS citizens who have psionic powers for work in Psi-Battalion.

Page 81 – Identification and Orientation

Page 81 – JDMP: Tier Zero Training

Page 81 – The MPR Program

Page 82 – CS Psi-Soldiers

Page 82 – Academy of Psychic Combat

Page 83 – Tier One Classes & Bonuses

Page 83 – Tier Two Training

Page 84 – Psychic Martial Arts

Page 85 – Dishearten Psi-Martial Combat

Page 87 – Hand to Hand: Telekinetics

Page 89 – Kings Telepathic Psychic Martial Arts

Page 90 – Combat Empathy

Page 92 – Psi-Bat Squads

Artwork by *Michael Mumah*

## Page 94 – The Well of Visions

### – Official material for Rifts®

Matthew Clements presents a story that gives viewers a glimpse into **Rifts® Northern Gun™ One, Two** and **Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames™**. Enjoy the foreshadowing and hints of things to come.

## The Theme for Issue 64

The theme of **The Rifter #64** is secrets and monsters in a wide range of Palladium game settings. All tinged with a touch of the ominous or outright horror. Since we are celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Palladium Fantasy®, we are making sure every 2013 issue of **The Rifter®** contains Fantasy source material. New Fantasy titles should be coming your way in 2014.

## The Rifter® Needs You

We need new writers and artists to fill the next few decades of **The Rifter®**. You do not need to be a professional writer to contribute to **The Rifter®**. This publication is like a "fanzine," written by fans for fans. A forum in which gamers just like *you*

can submit articles, G.M. advice, player tips, house rules, adventures, new magic, new psionics, new super abilities, monsters, villains, high-tech weapons, vehicles, power armor, short works of fiction and more. So think about writing up something short (even something as small as 4-6 pages). Newcomers and regular contributors are always welcomed.

**The Rifter®** needs new material, especially when it comes to adventures and source material, for *all* of our game lines, especially *Rifts®*, *Chaos Earth™*, *Palladium Fantasy RPG®*, *Heroes Unlimited™*, *Ninjas and Superspies™*, *Beyond the Supernatural™*, *Dead Reign™*, *Splicers®* and *Nightbane®*.

Pay is lousy, fame is dubious, but you get to share your ideas and adventures with fellow gamers and get four free copies to show to your friends and family.

## The Cover

Every 2013 cover of **The Rifter®** has been fantasy, to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the *Palladium Fantasy RPG®*. This one is by Palladium artist and fan favorite, **Charles Walton**.

## 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, homespun adventures and material mostly created by fellow gamers and fans like you, the reader. Things one can *elect* to include in one's own campaign or simply enjoy reading about. 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 ideas and concepts that you can use (if you want to), or which might inspire you to create your own wonders.

## www.palladiumbooks.com – Palladium Online

## The Rifter® #65

**The Rifter® #65** is our first issue of the New Year and will present our plans for 2014 along with a nice array of source material and fun.

- Source material for **Rifts®**.
- Source material for **Heroes Unlimited™**.
- Source material for other settings.
- News, coming attractions and much more.
- And maybe YOUR submission. Send us something and see if you get published.

**Bringing you infinite possibilities  
limited only by your imagination™**

**Celebrating 30 years of Palladium Fantasy RPG®**

MEMORIAL

MAR. 10, 1977 - DEC. 22, 2012

29 years Old\*

MAY HIS AWESOMENESS

LIVE



# From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

The October issue of **The Rifter**® is our Halloween/Horror issue. Which is what you are holding in your hands. Only it didn't ship till the end of November, which means many of you may not even receive it in the mail till December. Sorry about that. This is the first time that two issues in the same year have been released late (a first we hope not to repeat in 2014). Our apologies for any disappointment or confusion that may have been caused for any of you. The Rifter® remains a fun and interesting platform in which to get "optional" and "official" source material, especially for game lines like the **Palladium Fantasy RPG**®, **Nightbane**®, **Splicers**® and **Beyond the Supernatural**™, that haven't enjoyed much new support by way of new books in the last few years (that should change starting 2014).

Despite being late, this is another outstanding issue packed with a wide variety of fan and professional material for your enjoyment. It is also the last issue to celebrate the **30th Anniversary of the Palladium Fantasy RPG**® with another dynamic Fantasy cover (this one by Chuck Walton), a Fantasy adventure, and official Fantasy source material compliments of me, Matt and Chuck.

**For Halloween** and a touch of horror, we think you'll find the **Nightbane**® and **Beyond the Supernatural**™ material, as well as the **Dead Reign**™ story, more than satisfying. The **Rifts**® short story and Coalition source material may not qualify as horror, per se, unless your character is on the receiving end of a CS attack or its psionic defenses, but they also have a nice dark over-tone appropriate for our annual horror issue.

I think you'll find it all fun and intriguing, with a little bit for everybody. Enjoy.

## 'Tis the Season

The Autumn issue of **The Rifter**® always straddles a number of holidays. It is our horror/Halloween issue, but as the last issue of the year, it is also the issue that kicks off the *holiday season* with the launch of Palladium's **Annual Christmas Surprise Package offer**.

### What is the Christmas Surprise Package offer?

It is the best deal in gaming. Heck, it may very well be the best deal of the holiday season, bar none!

Forget weekend and single day *doorbuster* events, the **Palladium Christmas Surprise Package** deal lasts from **November through December 23, 2013**. And not only do you get great deals on Palladium products, but you can get every book *autographed* by the Palladium staff, available freelance artists and writers, as well as get special limited edition prints, and even be considered for original artwork. *Nobody offers anything like this!*

**Get \$80 to \$90 worth of Palladium products for only \$40** (plus shipping & handling), each book autographed (if you want 'em), and more! **See the full description** elsewhere in this issue for all the details and how to order your Surprise Package via mail or telephone (734-721-2903 order line only). Please follow the instructions carefully and submit a list of 10-14 items on your *Wish List* to maximize the fun and surprise of this unique gift package.

**And the Surprise Packages are not just for Christmas.** It's part of the season of joy and giving and can be purchased for Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, housewarmings, or a way to say thank you to your Game Master or gaming pal, and any other situation where a gift might be appropriate.

## A time for thanks, love and joy

To me, this entire holiday season is about friends, family, joy and thankfulness. I don't need **Thanksgiving Day** here in the USA to remind me how lucky I am. I'm thankful to have a career that I adore, friends – truly wonderful and amazing friends – with whom to share my work and life, the sweetest, kindest and most imaginative lady in the world to call my sweetheart, a son, daughter and granddaughter to love (the latter will be enjoying her second Christmas!), and gamers by the thousands from around the world as part of my extended family and friends.

That's why we do the *Palladium Christmas Surprise Package* every year. Because we are fortunate to have the *greatest fans* (many of them friends) from around the whole darn world. I mean it. The Surprise Package is our way of saying thank you to all of you. Thank you for your support and friendship. Thank you for your patience and understanding during our long struggle to recover from treachery and putting up with frequent delays in product releases. Thank you for your kind words, warm handshakes, and generous natures. Thank you for making my life and the lives of all Palladium creators richer for being in them. You are appreciated more than you may ever realize. Have a truly beautiful and joyous holiday season.

## Tell those you love, you care

In recent years, the Palladium family has dealt with what feels like far more than our fair share of challenges and tragedy. Amongst them are the losses of my own beloved father *Henry*, my *Aunt Jo and Uncle Skip*, Kathy's sister *Cindy*, my friend Keith Parkinson, and too many others. For me, the sudden and shocking death of *Erick Wujcik* (2008) was one of the most difficult to endure and work through. Alex also lost his father and brother-in-law, Jeff his sweet gentle wife, Wayne his grandparents, and I'm sure many of *you* have lost loved ones you cherished.

Most recently, for us, was the loss of dear friend and Palladium supporter, **Kathryn Kozora**. Kate was a special lady, sweet and kind. Always worried about the people she loved most in the world, including her immediate family and the Palladium family. Though she lives on in our hearts and memories, she will be missed. The thought that she is reunited with the love of her life, Erick Wujcik, makes me smile and sad at the same time.

**During the holiday season**, I encourage *you* to tell the people *you* love and cherish how much they mean to you. Take the time to call your mother, father, brother, sister, child, and friends to tell them you love them. Drop them a card or a note, an email or tweet, to let them know *they matter*. That you are thinking of them, and that you are so glad they are in your life. Don't wait till Christmas. Do it today! You never know what tomorrow may



bring. Do it right now. Put down this excellent issue of *The Rift-er*® and pick up that phone to make a call or send a text message.

And when you see them, give them a big hug or kiss and let them know they are loved and important in your life. That, my dear, dear friends, is the greatest gift of all. To feel loved and appreciated.

Happy Holidays from the Palladium family to you and yours. May it be full of laughter, love and happiness.

– Kevin Siembieda, *Publisher & Luckiest Guy in the World*

# Palladium News

By Kevin Siembieda, the guy who should know

## Artist Mike Mumah doing great art again

For those of you who may not know, Palladium artist and pal, Mike Mumah, had a life-threatening stroke just before last Christmas. He has spent much of 2013 in physical therapy and voice therapy. Mike has lost weight, exercises and is thrilled to be back in the saddle doing artwork for Palladium Books once again. You can see his latest artistic efforts in **Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 4: Fear the Reaper™**. And it's as good as always. To commemorate this Christmas, Mike did the artwork on page 6 depicting himself as one of Santa's Elves crawling out of the grave because he's too talented, too feisty and has too much to live for. Merry Christmas, Mike, we're glad to have you back.

## 2014 Gen Con® Indy

### Game Masters, run Palladium games there

Palladium is planning to make the **2014 Gen Con® Indy** its biggest and best in decades. Our booth will be twice the size it was this year, we'll have the **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** game and expansion packs, as well as many new RPG products.

**We want a strong presence and need your help.** We want Palladium to have a powerful presence not just in the dealers' hall, but via dozens and dozens of 'official' Palladium gaming events. **Game Masters attending Gen Con**, we NEED YOU to submit your Palladium gaming events to Gen Con by January 15, 2014 to guarantee placement in the program book and online schedule. The more Palladium G.M.s and gaming events we can get together by January, the better the odds are that we can get a designated Palladium space or room at Gen Con in 2014. Let's make this a reality!

Please coordinate with *Bill Korsak* and Palladium's **Megaversal Ambassador coordinators** to run 'official' Palladium gaming events throughout the 2014 Gen Con 4-day weekend. If you were planning to run already, please submit your game event forms to Gen Con by January 15, 2014, but also coordinate with us. Let us know what events and how many you are running so Palladium can make special arrangements with Gen Con to feature your games! If you weren't planning to run, but want to get in on the action, please contact **Palladium Books** (734-721-2903) or the **Megaversal Ambassadors** at [ambassadors@palladiumbooks.com](mailto:ambassadors@palladiumbooks.com).

If we can get enough gaming events in place by January 15, 2014, we can get a dedicated gaming area for *ALL of the Palladium events* – or even a specified game room. That will mean a place where Palladium G.M.s and fans can game around the clock, 24/7. With this being the **30th Anniversary of Heroics Unlimited™** and a big release year for **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**, we want to shout to the world that Palladium Books is back with a vengeance. Please help. Thank you.

**January 2014 Gen Con deadline.** To get a dedicated space, we NEED you to submit your gaming event forms to GEN CON INDY by January 15, 2014. This also gets you listed in the official Gen Con schedule. If you have questions, you can call the office on the Palladium order line, 734-271-2903, and ask for *Jeff Burke*. Thank you.

## Palladium Open House 2015

We have made the decision to hold a Palladium Open House at the Palladium warehouse and offices at the end of April or early May, 2015. A final date has not yet been set. We wanted to let you know as soon as possible because we know gamers from coast to coast, in Canada and overseas need to start saving their money, take vacation time from work and start making travel arrangements early. We hope to see a full house of 300 gamers at the 2015 Open House (only a year and a half away), so start making your plans and spread the word. We can only accommodate 300 or so people so space is limited to a first-come, first-served basis. More details coming soon.

## Detroit Fanfare Report

We want to try to make the Detroit Fanfare gaming and comic convention our mini-Palladium Open House. A place where we and our fans can gather, hang out and game, and Palladium can sell books, chat and sign autographs for a weekend every year; in between "official" Palladium Open Houses (every few years). This year, Detroit Fanfare was held October 25-27. We had a blast gaming, running Robotech RPG Tactics demos and chatting with fans.

Attendance seemed light, sales were so-so, but we had a great time and we'll try it again in October 2014. The entire *Palladium staff*, except for Kathy Simmons, was there along with *Chuck Walton, Carmen Bellaire, Mark Dudley* and *Ben Rodriguez*, on hand to meet fans, sign books and chat.

I was surprised by how many Palladium fans came from such great distances. In addition to fellow Michiganders (though some from quite a distance away in Michigan), we had some Windsorites, a nice couple from Ottawa, Canada (it was great meeting you both, Suzanne and Clayton), Brett and Lin from Toronto, Thomas from New York, and many others. I hope you all enjoyed yourselves. I sure did. It was fun. We had the pleasure of meeting *Steve Yun* from **Harmony Gold**, too. Despite Palladium having been a *Robotech® licensee* for going on three decades, I have never met *Tommy Yune* or *Steve Yun* in person – only on the telephone and via emails. It was really nice to put a face to the voice on the phone and name at the end of so many emails.

I also had the pleasure of seeing and reconnecting with several old friends, as well as meeting some new, interesting folks, including a potential new artist or two. So while the convention was work, we all enjoyed our time at Detroit Fanfare.

## Rifts® Northern Gun™ One in stores everywhere

Rifts® Northern Gun™ One was released in October to rave reviews. People are loving Rifts® Northern Gun™ One and its 28 robots, wealth of world information, characters, and adventure ideas. Don't take our word for it, check out a copy at your local store.

For those of you who participated in the Rifts® Northern Gun™ One Megaverse® Insider crowdfunding, by the time you read this, your **NG-1 Hardcover edition(s)** should be on their way to you, if not already in your hands. Thanks for the support!

## Rifts® Northern Gun™ Two

This is the next book to be released by Palladium (with **Megaverse® in Flames** and **Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook** to quickly follow). This book is every bit as jam-packed with a wealth of information and gear as NG-1, maybe more. I mean there is power armor, body armor, hovercycles, combat vehicles, hauler robots, drones, the robot gladiatorial arena, and more. Probably a January, 2014 release.

## Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames™

*Carl Gleba's Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames™* is a title that will instigate turmoil and change that will provide plenty of fodder for adventure. It has also spawned a surprise title that fans of the Coalition States are going to love. Likely to be an early 2014 (February?) release.

## Christmas Surprise Package

Don't miss out. Available now till December 23, 2013. See the **full description** elsewhere in this issue.

## FREE Erick Wujcik Keepsake

### Available in Christmas Surprise Package

With the loss of Erick Wujcik's mate, Kathryn Kozora, Erick has been on our minds a lot. You know his work from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles® RPG*, *Rifts® China One* and *Two* or *Amber Diceless*. Now you can own a book or magazine from Erick's personal collection as a special keepsake. Erick was a voracious reader and (like me) hung on to most everything he read. We pack rats are like that.

If your request an **Erick Wujcik keepsake** in your Surprise Package, we will include one such paperback novel or magazine for your reading enjoyment and own collection. It will come with a stamp that says "From the collection of Erick Wujcik" or a small statement of origin. No extra charge.

## More Robotech® RPG titles are coming

There is renewed interest in the **Robotech® role-playing game line** and we have several new releases in development. As mentioned last issue, the manuscript for the first of two **Robotech® UEEF Marines sourcebooks** from writer *Irvin Jackson* is in our hands, and he is currently working on the second one. Writer *Jim Sorenson* (yes, some of you know Jim for his *Trans-*

*formers* books) is working on a Zentraedi sourcebook and there are ideas for many others. See the description for **Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook One** in the coming attractions.

## Robotech® RPG Tactics™ – Rescheduled for 2014

Despite Ninja Division and Palladium's original plans and best efforts, the roll-out for the **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** game line has been revised to 2014. We expect to get harder details in a week or two and hope to announce a more definitive release date soon.

**First**, not only is this Palladium Books' very first Kickstarter, this is also our first venture into making a game like **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**. Our learning curve has been steep and this undertaking is massive, even with *Ninja Division's* experience and handling of much of this.

**Second**, the scope of **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** was expansive and demanding to begin with, and grew as the Kickstarter went on. The sheer number of different product SKUs, special figures, poses, components for the box game, the many expansion kits, and so on, has meant a tremendous amount of work and logistics. That's okay, because we want this game line to be truly epic, but it has proven challenging for everyone involved.

**Third**, the consensus of everyone, Palladium Books to Ninja Division and Harmony Gold, has been that it is better to get this product right than to rush it.

**Fourth, detail matters.** As Palladium Books has stated before, we want the end product to be everything Robotech fans could want. And we have a pretty good idea of what that is, because a) we listen to you, and b) we are super-fans ourselves. This has actually added to Ninja Division's workload, because we want these representations of the Robotech® mecha we all know and love to be as detailed and awesome as possible. When there were shortcuts Ninja Division could have taken or Palladium could have authorized, we agreed not to do so in order to give you a superior product.

For example, that has meant numerous additions and tweaks to sculpts, and additional cost and engineering considerations for mold-making and manufacturing. This has caused delays and doubled the cost of the molds, but Palladium is willing to make that sacrifice to give you the best product we can possibly make. No cutting corners if we can avoid it.

**The ship date.** At this point, we still do not have an exact release date, but it's not December, as we have not even gone into manufacturing yet. Soon, we hope. If I had to guess, I'd say *February, 2014*. Palladium Books and Ninja Division are looking to firm up details and dates, and we'll provide them to you as we get them ourselves.

Is this delay disappointing? Of course, but this is worth doing right. Palladium has spent thousands of dollars on advertising stating the game is coming out in the Fall of 2013 and December 2013, so obviously, that was the plan. But as I said, when faced with sacrificing quality, we all agreed to take a step back and go with quality even if it meant delaying the release. Even our distributors, who are champing at the bit for this game just like you, agreed it is better to do Robotech® right than to rush it out for fast sales, or quick, personal gratification.

## Here's how things are unfolding:

**1. Almost there.** The design and layout work for the rule book, stat cards, packaging and accessories are all pretty much complete. They are the fast and easy part of manufacturing. It's the final mold engineering and mold-making that has been taking some time to keep the details and features we know you'll want. As we get close to finalizing that process, we approach the actual manufacturing. However, our earlier delays mean we face a glut of product in the pipeline for Christmas, and potentially further delays.

**2. Manufacturing.** How soon our job can get into manufacturing (hopefully later this month) will determine how quickly we'll get the finished product. Other factors include the Chinese New Year that closes down much of the manufacturing for a few weeks, and shipping to the USA port (another 4-6 weeks), then clearing Customs and then shipping to Palladium. The latter should go quickly (a week?).

**3. USA:** Once product is in Palladium's hands, even with an efficient assembly line set up and additional help brought in, it will take some time to process, pick, pack and ship the 5,000+ Kickstarter orders and the many Kickstarter accessories and special items. **Note:** Kickstarter orders will ship before Palladium sends any product to distributors for retail distribution. We appreciate your support, and you will get the product before it goes to retail. And remember, MANY of the Kickstarter items will be in your hands *months* before the retail expansion packs are released in waves to retail. Enjoy.

**4. EU & Overseas:** We have made special arrangements to pull, pack and address your packages at the Palladium warehouse, and then ship them in bulk to an agent who will post them from within the EU. That should mean everyone in the EU will get shipped around the same time, but after packages are shipped in the USA.

We will update details and provide firmer dates as we learn them. Meanwhile, Palladium will continue to provide you with images of actual game pieces and the full production packages as we go along.

Our apologies for the longer than anticipated wait. The game pieces/models are gorgeous, the game is a fast, fun simulation of the Robotech® TV show, and this product will be worth it!

## Rifts® Northern Gun™ One

### *Sneak Preview* – now on DriveThruRPG.com

A FREE Sneak Preview of Rifts® Northern Gun™ One is available on DriveThruRPG.com for your perusal. There are also previews available for the Rifts® Vampires Sourcebook, Rifts® Vampire Kingdoms™ (Revised Edition), Rifts® Black Market, Rifts® Lemuria, Dead Reign™ RPG, Endless Dead™ sourcebook and others. The original Rifts® Vampire Kingdoms World Book is also available as a PDF on DriveThruRPG, for those of you who may be interested.

More than 90 out of print and special Palladium titles can be found on DriveThruRPG.com as PDFs, including Splicers®, Rifts® RPG 1st Edition, The Rifter® #1-52, and first edition rule books and sourcebooks for Palladium Fantasy RPG®, Heroes Unlimited™, The Mechanoid Invasion® Trilogy, Beyond the Supernatural™ and lots of other good titles. DriveThruRPG.com also offers the Rifts® and Palladium Fantasy®

Game Master Kits (\$5 each; both written by Carl Gleba and complete with maps, combat matrix, character sheets, spell list, and 20 pre-rolled characters created by Julius Rosenstein). Check it all out.

# Coming Attractions

## Palladium's 2013 Release Checklist

### Notable 2013 Releases & Events

- The Rifter® #61 – available now.
- The Rifter® #62 – available now.
- The Rifter® #63 – available now.
- The Rifter® #64 – available now.
- Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Kickstarter – Success.
- Robotech® Macross™ Saga – back in print; 8½ x 11 size.
- Rifts® Ultimate Edition – new printing available now.
- Rifts® Vampires Sourcebook – available now.
- Rifts® World Book: Northern Gun™ One – available now.
- Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 4: Fear the Reaper™ – available now.

### 2014 First Quarter

- The Rifter® #65 – New – January 2014.
- Rifts® World Book: Northern Gun™ Two – New
- Rifts®: Megaverse® in Flames™ – New
- Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook One – New
- Rifts® Chaos Earth™: Rise of Magic™ – back in print
- Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Boxed Game – New (tentative)
- Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Kits – New (tentative)

### Coming later in 2014

- Rifts® Chaos Earth™ Sourcebook: First Responders
- Rifts® Chaos Earth™ Sourcebook: Resurrection
- Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook Two
- More Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Kits
- Beyond the Supernatural™ Sourcebook: Beyond Arcanum™
- Beyond the Supernatural™ Sourcebook: Tome Grotesque™
- Rifts® sourcebooks (tentative)
- Splicers® Sourcebooks (tentative)
- Dead Reign™ Sourcebook (tentative)
- Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebook (tentative)
- Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebooks (tentative)

Palladium RPGs are available in many hobby and game stores around the world. We encourage people to support their local stores. Going to a store enables you to see the product before purchasing it, and many stores are happy to place special orders for you, provided you pay in advance, enabling you to avoid the cost of shipping and possible damage in the mail.

**Ordering from Palladium Books:** You can also order directly from Palladium Books, but you will pay extra for shipping. For customers with access to a computer, we recommend ordering

online to get the most accurate shipping costs (or by telephone; 734-721-2903, order line only). For customers without such access, use the following “mail order” process.

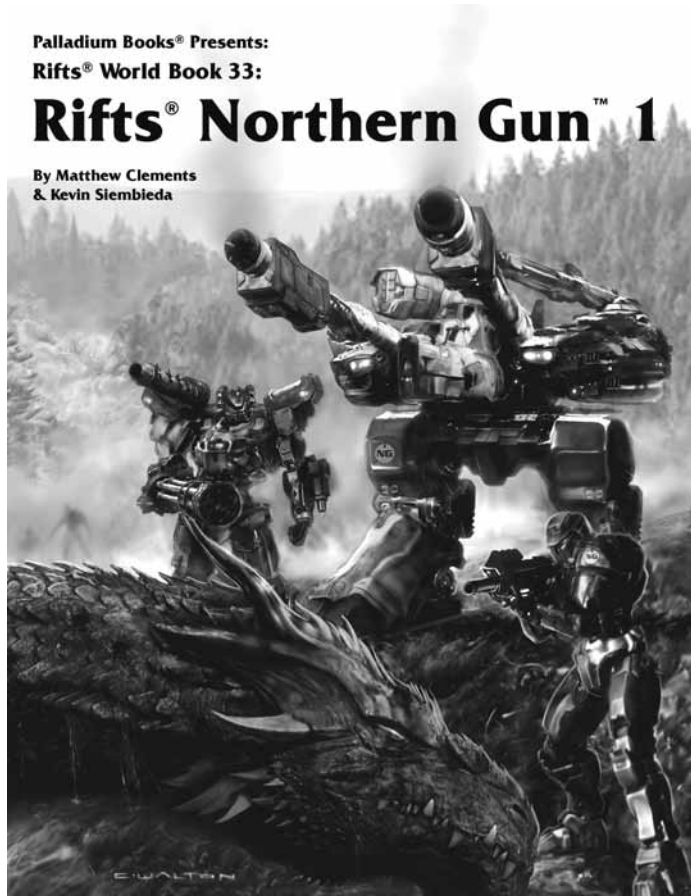
1. Send the cost of the books or items being ordered.

2. **In the USA:** Add \$5 for orders totaling \$1-\$50 to cover shipping and handling. Add \$9 for orders totaling \$51-\$100. Add \$15 for orders totaling \$101-\$200. **Outside the USA:** Double the shipping amount for orders going to Canada, and triple it for overseas orders. Any and all additional costs incurred as a result of Customs fees and taxes are the responsibility of the foreign customer, NOT Palladium Books.

3. Make checks or money orders payable to *Palladium Books*.

4. Please make sure to send us your complete and correct address.

**Note:** These costs are for the least expensive and slowest method of shipping only. Allow 2-4 weeks for delivery. Order online or call the office for a superior but more costly shipping method.



**NEW! Rifts® World Book 33:**

## **Northern Gun™ One – Available Now**

**Rifts® Northern Gun™ One** is the most tech-filled World Book Palladium has ever produced. In addition to world information, background and O.C.C.s for the Northern Gun corporation and Ishpeming, there are 27 robots, 70+ weapons and all kinds of dynamic information and gaming resources. Courtesy of the largest arms dealer and independent manufacturer on the continent: *Northern Gun™*.

*Northern Gun™* is the most famous arms manufacturer in North America. Outside of the Coalition States, one could argue, no other kingdom is as powerful or influential, at least when

it comes to technology and weapons. The manufacture and sale of Northern Gun weapons and vehicles has given virtually every kingdom, town, colony of settlers and adventurer group a chance to survive and prosper. Located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, NG has been the premier outfitter of mercenaries, adventurers and upstart kingdoms for generations. Now, for the first time ever, learn Northern Gun's history, goals and plans for the future. Of course, that means new weapons, robots, power armor, vehicles and gear.

- **In-depth look at Northern Gun, its robots, stores, politics and operations.**
- **70+ NG weapons; old and new.**
- **27 NG giant combat and exploration robots. Described in detail.**
- **Many new robot weapon systems and features, including alternative power supplies, anti-monster gear and experimental weapons.**
- **NG freighter ships, hovertrains & Random Cargo tables.**
- **Notable cities and people of the Ishpeming Republic/Northern Gun.**
- **NG O.C.C.s, police, specialists and NG Mercenary army.**
- **The NG Mercenary army and police.**
- **The NG Bounty Board and merc contracts on Rifts Earth.**
- **Key locations, people and dangers around Northern Gun.**
- **NG mercenary defenders, groups and pirates.**
- **Northern Gun's relationship with the CS and other nations.**
- **Wraparound cover by Chuck Walton.**
- **Written by Matthew Clements, Kevin Siembieda and others.**
- **224 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 887. Available now.**

## **NEW! Fear the Reaper™**

**Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 4 – Available now**

Like knights mounted on motorcycles, the Road Reapers travel the wasteland that Earth has become, searching for survivors, fighting zombies and waging war against the Death Cults that threaten all mankind.

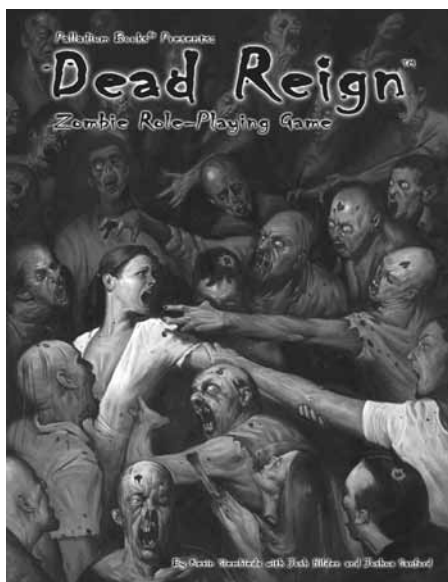
This epic sourcebook explores the nature of heroes and heroism in the Zombie Apocalypse. It contains the secrets of the fabled Road Reapers, their structure, leadership, missions and purpose, as well as gear and combat notes. Plus a horrifying new zombie known as the *Terror Zombie*, along with *Floater*s (zombies in water) and which zombies can swim. Survival is one thing. Can you keep your humanity and be a hero?

- **Comprehensive background on the legendary Road Reapers™ – zombie hunters and heroes of the Zombie Apocalypse.**
- **The Road Reaper Way of Life: Living and fighting on the road.**
- **The Road Reapers' Code – a guide to being a Road Reaper and hero.**
- **Structure and organization of Road Reaper units.**
- **Road Reaper Specializations like the Ex-Con, Road Captain, Scout and Fix-It Man.**
- **Road Reaper missions, strategies and tactics.**
- **Notable weapons and gear used by the Road Reapers.**
- **Stats for snowmobiles and boats. Optional character tables.**



- **Terror Zombie**, an amalgamation of horror fused to a **Mock Zombie**.
- **Zombies in water** and which ones can swim!
- Many **adventure ideas** and **random tables**, by Matthew Clements.
- **48 pages** – \$12.95 retail – Cat. No. 234. Available now.

And Don't Forget about . . .

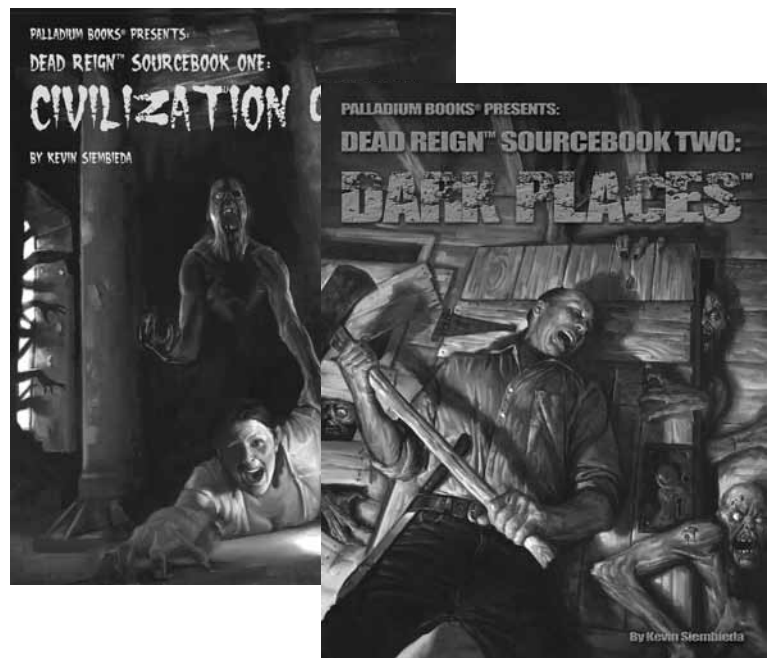


**Dead Reign™ RPG.** It is the aftermath of the *Zombie Apocalypse*. Civilization is gone, the dead reign, and the living fight to survive against impossible odds. Tales of zombies, human survival and horror as a fast-paced, easy to learn game and sourcebooks.

- **Zombie combat rules, vehicles and equipment.**
- **Six iconic Apocalyptic Character Classes and Ordinary People** with 40+ occupations to choose from.
- **Seven types of zombies** plus the **Half-Living**.
- **Secrets of the Dead** and tips on fighting zombies.
- **Death Cults, their Priests, power over zombies and goals.**
- **101 Random Scenarios, Encounters and Settings.**
- **100 Random Corpse Searches** and other tables.
- **Quick Roll Character Creation tables (10 minutes).**
- **A complete role-playing game** by Siembieda and others.
- **\$22.95 retail** – 224 pages – Cat. No. 230. Available now.

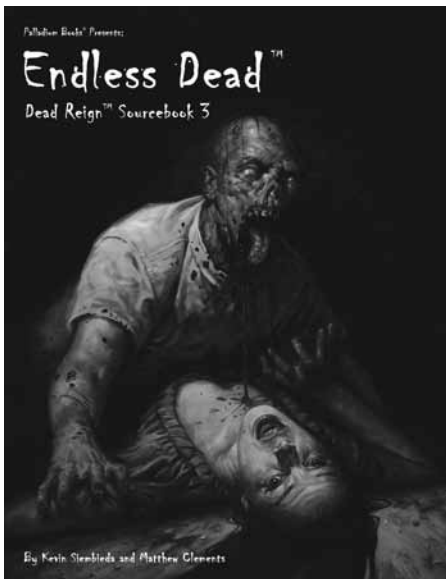
**Dead Reign™ Sourcebook One: Civilization Gone™.** It has been months since the dead rose to attack the living. Civilization has crumbled. There is no army, no government, no help coming. You are on your own and things are only getting worse.

- **Madmen and Psychopaths** including the *Zombie Master, Ghost Walker, Backstabber, Messianic Leader, Zombie Lover, Deathbringer* and others.
- **Bandits and Raiders** who prey upon other survivors.
- **Street Gang Protectors** and their mission to save lives.
- **Phobia and Obsession tables.** Many adventure ideas.
- **House and home resource and encounter tables.**
- **Random encounter and survivor camp creation tables.**
- **Additional world information and survival advice.**
- **\$12.95 retail** – 64 pages – Cat. No. 231. Available now.



**Dead Reign™ Sourcebook Two: Dark Places™.** Secrets of survival, including using railroad tracks and the urban underground to travel unseen and undetected by zombies.

- **Worm Meat, Bug Boy, Sewer Crawler and Impersonator Zombies.**
- **“Live Bait”** zombie lures with human beings as bait.
- **Traveling the rails and boxcar encounter tables.**
- **Traveling sewer tunnels, steam tunnels & other dark places.**
- **The pitfalls and dangers of the urban underground.**
- **Diseases, infection and additional world information.**
- **Random encounter tables, boxcar content tables, and more.**
- **\$12.95 retail** – 64 pages – Cat. No. 232. Available now.



**Dead Reign™ Sourcebook 3: Endless Dead™.** The zombie hordes grow in number and strangeness. Can humankind survive? Where is the military?

- New types of zombies like Fused Zombies and the Walking Mass Grave.
- New O.C.C.s including Wheelman, Zombie Hunter & Zombie Researcher.
- Info & tables for weaponizing vehicles and vehicle combat rules.
- Random encounter tables for military bases, police stations, gun stores, buildings, suburbs, industrial parks, small towns, farmland and wilderness.
- Tables for creating Survivor caravans, hideouts, Safe Havens & more.
- Timetable for setting zombie campaigns and many adventure ideas.
- \$16.95 retail – 96 pages – Cat. No. 233. Available now.

## The Rifter® #65 – January 2014

The Rifter® #65 will ship in January. It will offer more of what you expect from this publication, plus what's coming in 2014, the latest news and other good stuff.

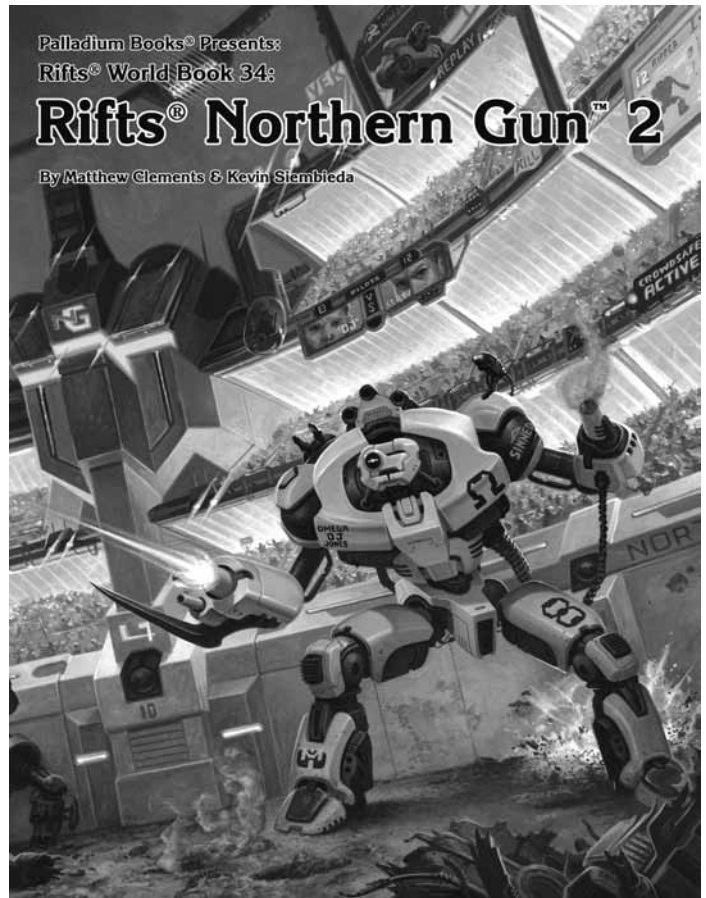
- Optional source material for 3-5 settings.
- News, coming attractions, and more.
- 96 pages – \$11.95 retail – Cat. No. 165. January release.

Coming – Rifts® World Book 34:

## Northern Gun™ Two

In production! Expanded to 192-224 pages and filled with all kinds of adventuring gear: New environmental body armor, power armor, hovercycles, robot drones, robot haulers, combat vehicles, other vehicles, robot gladiators and much more. More information about the weapons, vehicles and practices of Northern Gun, including the new rage of robot gladiatorial combat. Expanded page count. Epic adventure.

- NG robot haulers and drones.
- NG power armor suits; an expansive range.
- NG M.D.C. body armor, and combat gear.
- NG bionics, cybernetic services and other equipment.



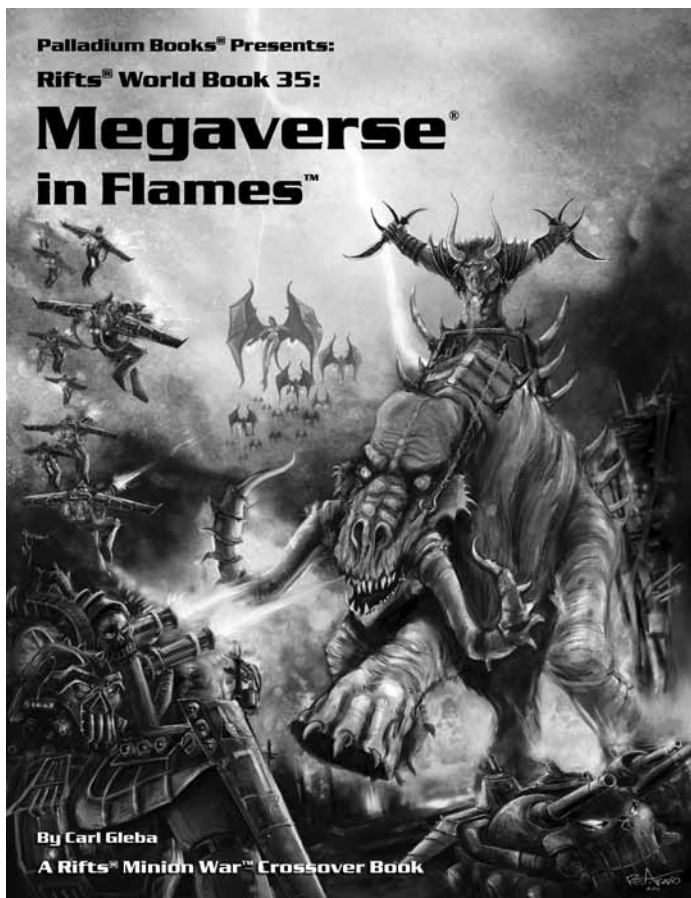
- NG hovercycles, land vehicles and combat vehicles.
- NG jet packs and aircraft.
- NG boats, ships and submarines.
- NG Robot Gladiatorial Arena.
- Robot Gladiator O.C.C. and robot gladiators.
- Pirates and more.
- Written by Matthew Clements and Kevin Siembieda.
- Interior Artwork by Chuck Walton, Nick Bradshaw, and others.
- Wraparound cover by John Zeleznik.
- 192-224 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 888. January 2014 (tentative).

Coming – Rifts® World Book 35:

## Megaverse® in Flames™

The Minion War spills across Rifts Earth, where demons and infernals hope to recruit allies and use the Rifts as gateways of destruction. Their influence shakes things up across the planet, especially at locations where demons and Devils already have a strong presence. Demons, Devils and supernatural beings run rampant and wreak havoc across the world.

- Demon plagues and mystic blights.
- Soulmancy and Blood Magic revealed.
- Magical and demonic weapons and war machines.
- Demonic armies, strongholds and places of evil.
- Hell Pits and Rune Forges.
- Many Demon Lords, their minions and plans.
- Calgary, the Kingdom of Monsters; in detail.
- Ciudad de Diablo, Harpies' Island & other places.



- Lord Doom, Lord Pain and other demonic leaders.
- Horune treachery, Dimension Stormers and other villains.
- Notable demonic generals, mercenaries, people and places.
- Battleground: Earth – as demons and infernals amass their legions.
- Epic battles and adventure ideas galore.
- Written by Carl Gleba. Part of the Minion War “Cross-over” series.
- 192 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 876. February 2014 (tentative).

## Coming – Robotech® UEEF Marines™ Sourcebook One

This is another book that is guaranteed to wow and please Robotech® fans.

- New mecha and weapons.
- Aliens and space adventure.
- Written by Irvin Jackson.
- 160 pages – Cat. No. 553 – \$20.95 – March 2014 (tentative).

## Robotech® Macross® Saga Sourcebook

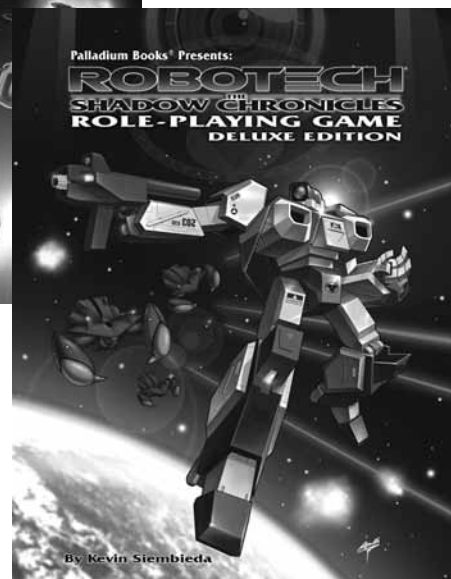
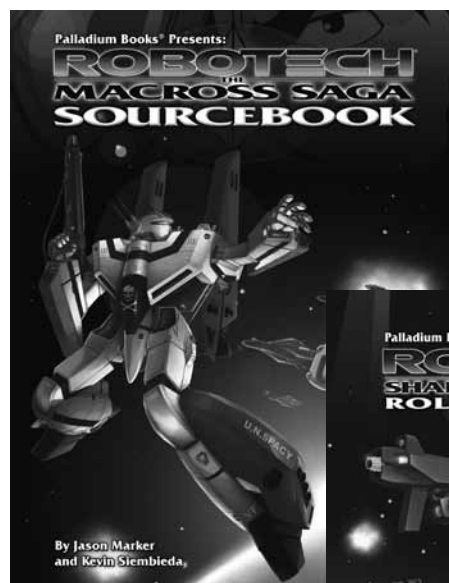
– New size – 8½ x 11 – Available now

Robotech® The Macross® Saga Sourcebook now available as an 8½ x 11 inch sourcebook. All the famous mecha and action of Robotech® starts here with the Macross® Saga when an alien armada enters Earth orbit. They have come to reclaim a lost spacecraft that crash-landed on Earth 10 years earlier. A space fortress that Earth’s protectors have rebuilt into their own flag-

ship against alien invasion. The resulting conflict gives birth to heroes and becomes the stuff of legend, but the Earth will never be the same.

**Note:** This is the setting for Robotech® RPG Tactics™, so if you’re looking for more information about the mecha, Earth’s defenders, the Zentraedi invaders, and Macross Saga setting, this is the book for you. Epic adventure awaits.

- A Robotech® Role-Playing Game Sourcebook.
- Transformable *Veritech Fighters* known as Valkyries take to the sky to defend the Earth.
- *Destroids*, giant walking tanks, are among Earth’s front-line defenders.
- The SDF-1 and Earth air, ground and space combat vehicles.
- Zentraedi mecha, powered armor suits, and select spacecraft.
- The Zentraedi warriors, their war machines and culture.
- Notable characters from the TV series started out.
- Quick Character Creation Tables enable you to make Macross characters in 15 minutes or less.
- New skills and M.O.S. skill bundles.
- Robotech® *The Shadow Chronicles® RPG* “rule book” is needed to play (Cat. No. 550 or Cat. No. 550HC).
- 96 pages – \$16.95 – Cat. No. 551.



## Robotech® The Shadow Chronicles® – Role-Playing Game

All the data and details you need to role-play Robotech® is found in the Robotech® The Shadow Chronicles® RPG – core rule book. Available in two affordable formats, a pocket-sized “manga” edition (\$16.95) and an 8½ x 11 inch hardcover edition (\$30.95).

## Robotech® The Shadow Chronicles® RPG – Manga-Size Edition

A complete RPG for \$16.95 – how can you pass up an unbeatable price like that? Give it a try.

- Play Veritech Pilots & Cyclone Riders.
- Play Battloid Aces and other heroes.
- Battle the Haydonites & Invid.
- Play your favorite mecha.
- Fast playing & quick combat.
- Quick Roll creation lets you create characters in under 15 minutes.
- A complete role-playing game.
- \$16.95 retail – 336 pages – Cat. No. 550 – Manga size, fits in a pocket.

## Robotech® The Shadow Chronicles® RPG “Deluxe” Hardcover

- All the same RPG rules and fun, plus . . .
- Space combat rules & select spacecraft.
- Additional weapons, vehicles & artwork.
- Play your favorite mecha.
- A complete role-playing game.
- \$30.95 retail – 8½ x 11 Hardcover – 224 pages – Cat. No. 550HC.

**Note:** A signed and numbered, *Gold Collector’s limited edition* with a signed tip-in color print (nine autographs) is also available for \$70.00 retail – 8½ x 11 – 224 pages – Cat. No. 5500HC.



## Robotech® RPG Tactics™

### Tactical Battle Game – Coming 2014

Robotech® RPG Tactics™ is a fast-paced, tabletop combat game that captures the action and adventure of the Robotech® anime. Two or more players can engage in small squad skirmishes or scale up to massive battles. Relive the clashes of the First Robotech War, engage in stand-alone tactical games or use the dynamic game pieces to enhance your Robotech® RPG experience. Or simply collect your favorite mecha from an expanding range of top-notch game pieces.

**Mecha vs Mecha.** Take command of the fighting forces of the *United Earth Defense Force (UEDF)* valiantly defending Earth from alien annihilation. Or lead the massive clone armies of the *Zentraedi Armada* to recover an alien artifact of immense power and enslave humankind.

### Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Box Set

- Brought to you by Palladium Books®, created with Ninja Division (the creative minds behind *Soda Pop Miniatures* and *Cipher Studios*).

- Full color, 96 page, softcover rule book; wraparound cover and lots of new, color artwork.
- 24 Battle Dice, 12 UEDF and 12 Zentraedi.
- 40 color game cards (unit cards, etc.).
- 4x VF-1A Valkyries (in Fighter, Guardian, and Battloid modes).
- 1x VF-1J “Officer” in all three modes.
- 4x Destroids: 2 Tomahawks and 2 Defenders.
- 12x Regult Zentraedi Battlepods.
- 1x Glaug Officer’s Battlepod.
- 1x Quel-Regult Recon Battlepod.
- 1x Quel-Gulnau Recovery Pod.
- 1/285th scale, high quality, multi-pose plastic game pieces (40mm to 70mm tall). World-class sculpts from sculptors around the world.
- Game rules use D6.
- Turn-based system of play.
- Scalable from small squad skirmishes to mass battles. Can accommodate two to several players.
- Combat is fast and designed to emulate the anime action.
- Measuring tape required to determine targets and distance.
- Small parts and some assembly required. Game pieces come unpainted.
- **Release Date:** Barring any unexpected delays, the Robotech® RPG Tactics™ box game and initial expansion sets ship 2014.
- **\$90 retail price (tentative).** The price of the final box set is not yet determined, but we want to hold it around \$90.
- **Cat. No. 55100 (Main Boxed Game).**
- Robotech® RPG Tactics™ is designed in partnership with Ninja Division. Ninja Division brings together the design talents of *Soda Pop Miniatures* and *Cipher Studios*, makers of *Super Dungeon™ Explore*, *Relic Knights™*, *Helldorado™* and *Anima Tactics™*.

### Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Kits

The initial expansion kits will also ship in 2014. All prices listed are likely, but still tentative. We want most kits to fall in the \$25-\$35 price range.

- **UEDF Valkyrie Wing** (2x each, Fighter, Guardian, Battloid) – Cat. No. 55201 – \$30.00 retail (tentative).
- **UEDF Destroid Pack** (2x Tomahawk, 2x Defender) – Cat. No. 55202 – \$30.00 (tentative).
- **UEDF Spartan Pack** (2x Spartan, 2x Phalanx), Cat. No. 55203 – \$30.00 (tentative).
- **Zentraedi Regult Battlepod Squadron** (6x Regults) – Cat. No. 55401 – \$30.00 (tentative).
- **Zentraedi Support Battlepods** (4x Artillery Battlepods) – Cat. No. 55402 – \$30.00 (tentative).
- **Zentraedi Command Pack** (1x Glaug, 1x Quel-Regult, 1x Quel-Gulnau) – Cat. No. 55403 – \$35.00 (tentative).
- Additional **expansion kits** at intervals throughout 2014. More will follow. Exactly how many, and how fast, will depend on manufacturing considerations, sales and customer demand.
- Palladium plans to release the mecha and settings for *ALL eras of Robotech®*. Many other details are still in development.
- Tournament play support is planned. **Ninja Division** will help Palladium to develop and launch the program.



# 2013 Christmas Surprise Package

## Available now till December 23, 2013

Every year for the last 15 or 16 years now, Palladium offers a **Christmas Surprise Package** – our way of saying thank you to our fans and helping to make your Christmas a little more special.

## What is a Palladium Christmas Surprise Package?

- **\$80-\$90 worth of Palladium products for only \$40 (plus shipping and handling)!** These days, that's the price of a core rule book or two supplements. Sometimes more!

- **Autographs** from Kevin Siembieda, available staff and freelance artists and writers. If you "request" autographs we'll sign *every* book in your box! For many, especially those across the country and overseas, this is the *only* way to get autographs from Kevin Siembieda and crew. *Take advantage of it.*

If you do NOT want autographs, please state – "No autographs."

If you do NOT want T-shirts, please write – "No T-shirts."

- **Each order is hand-picked by Kevin Siembieda** from a "wish list" you provide! Please list at least **10-14 items** that you know are in stock. PLEASE do not list books you know are *out of print*; you will not get them. **Note:** If you send a list of fewer than 8 titles, your order may be rejected.

- **The Grab Bag makes a wonderful gift for** Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays, anniversaries, etc., for the gamers in your life. Since there will be so much in every Surprise Package, ordering just one might enable you to give books to two or more pals.

- **Impress your friends with a gift worth \$80 or more** for a cost of only \$40 (plus shipping and handling).

- **Fill holes in your own collection** or get books and product you've been meaning to try or have been eyeballing longingly.

**It's a surprise package** because you never know exactly what you're going to get or who will sign your books. We try to include *many* of the items on your "wish list," but we may surprise you with stuff you are not expecting. Extra items may include other *RPG books*, *The Rifter*®, *posters*, *prints*, *art books*, *greeting cards*, *T-shirts*, *back stock items*, and other things. Some items may be slightly damaged so we can send you more.

**Spread the word.** The Christmas Surprise Package is only publicized by word of mouth, to readers of *The Rifter*® and on **Palladium's website** – [www.palladiumbooks.com](http://www.palladiumbooks.com) – so *tell everyone you know*. Buy one for *every gamer you know* and *have a very Merry Christmas*.

**Multiple orders WILL result in some duplication.**

## The Cost

\$40.00 plus \$10.00 for shipping & handling in the US; \$50 total.

\$40.00 plus \$30.00 estimated for shipping and handling to CANADA; \$70 total.

\$40.00 plus \$52.00 estimated for shipping and handling OVERSEAS; \$92 total. **Note:** Sorry, we are only passing along the postal rates of Priority Mail International (typically 4-10 days delivery). We always try to load up on orders going overseas, so you can expect at least \$90 worth of product with *autographs* and items you might not normally be able to get.

**All North American orders are shipped U.S.P.S. Media Mail (the "slow" Book Rate), or UPS, or the way Palladium de-**

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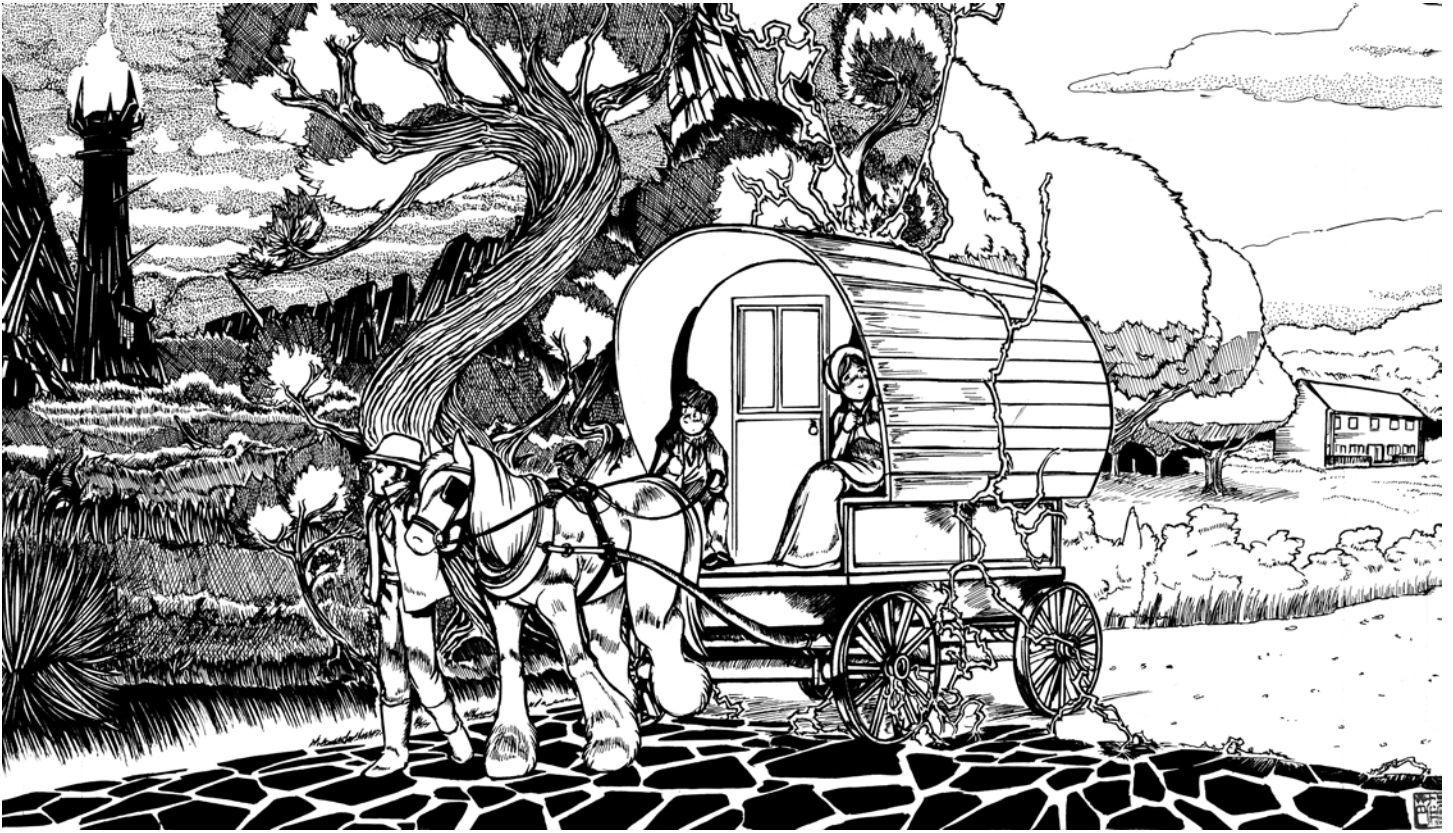
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# Tinkers

## Optional Source Material for the Nightbane® RPG

By Bryant Telfer

*“Since the early days of the United States, there have always been groups of travelers on the crude roads of the nation. Traveling from town to town, city to camp, making a living from any means available to them. Back in Europe, they had names for them: gypsies, travelers, pikeys, knackers. Which each name came the same accusations of theft, sloth, fraud and untruthfulness. Still, they continued to wander the road, each group and caravan traveling between those who had set down their roots in stone, finding an itinerant living and following the wind where and when it blew.”*

– Excerpt from *An Unending Road* by Professor Moira Dale,  
University of Chicago

History has always had nomadic cultures who never bound themselves to the structures of agricultural societies. In some cases, like the Mongols, only after conquering other cultures did they finally settle into the more rigid laws of civilization, losing their old ways. But in every society, there are people who find themselves perpetually restless, unable to settle for a static existence. In some cases, they end up as solitary drifters, moving from place to place. In other cases, like those of the famed Gypsies or the Irish Travelers, a complete society takes on the role of wanderer.

It is not known exactly when the Irish Travelers first came to America, but records indicate camps as far back at the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Referred to as either ‘tinkers’ or ‘knackers’ for their reg-

ular work mending implements or butchering and rending dead animals like horses, the society traveled widely, growing with the rest of the population as the United States moved west. Scorned as rogues and thieves by most town and city folk, Tinker society remained a close-knit and family oriented culture for years, occasionally adding new members from those who sought to emulate their existence.

As the US settled and industrialized, the role of the Tinker slowly began to change. They lived outside of the normal rules of law. They had no identification, no records of birth or death, and no citizenship. Often abused by police and local authorities, the Tinkers had no legal protection from arrest or wrongful persecution. More than a few Tinker camps found themselves on the wrong end of an angry local mob or an opportunistic sheriff.

The more such restrictions challenged them, the more the Tinkers came to embrace a new aspect to their travels. As itinerants, they had both the anonymity and opportunity to perform all manner of schemes and confidence games to earn money. Already considered thieves by the regular population, many Tinkers became them in actuality. While some families condemned the decision, claiming that a less materialistic life was the price to pay for their freedom on the road, most simply added it to the list of money-making options. Once the story of the European Gypsy was romanticized by Hollywood, many families also added fortune-telling to their list of abilities.

Myth has always played a central role in Tinker culture, where the oral tradition of storytelling was used to preserve both the history of each Traveler group and the legends brought from Ireland. Since coming to the United States, new myths have become enmeshed into the culture, with tales of Tinker heroes besting challenges both mundane and supernatural, usually through deception and silver-tongued trickery. Even before Dark Day, elements of the paranormal seemed drawn to the paths of the Tinkers.

A few Tinker families, who unconsciously followed routes that intersected with ley lines, found themselves traveling even stranger roads. Called 'the mirror crossing' by the families, the stories told of Travelers suddenly finding themselves in a harsh world, with cities like mockeries of those known in America, and where monsters and demons roamed freely. Some families who attempted the mirror crossings simply vanished, assumed killed by whatever creatures they encountered. Others survived, and learned how to fit into the edges of the mirror world as well as they did in the real world, and how to return from it. The storytellers actively mapped out places where the crossings happened most, and soon enough, some Tinker families began to move freely between both worlds.

When Dark Day happened, it took the Tinkers a long time to realize exactly what it meant for their people and how it was related to their mirror world. Suddenly, the mirror crossings were more stable, and their ability to move between worlds became as simple as moving between cities. To their dismay, some of the horrors that infested the mirror world also seemed to have come through the crossings and were sighted in our world. Like most groups, the Tinkers lost their chance to observe the quiet but dangerous changes going on in the government around them, instead dealing with the sudden manifestations in their own people.

Long considered 'fae-touched,' the small population of Tinkers would spawn a wide range of new talents and oddities, including many Nightbane. Once the initial shock had worn off, a series of calls were circulated around the Bosses of the families, and for the first time in fifty years, a Convivum that drew all the Travelers in the United States was held. Close to nine thousand Tinkers, almost the whole population, descended on the grounds in Tennessee that the Tinkers had actually *rented*, and amidst the almost carnival atmosphere, the Bosses met to discuss the future.

The families could never expel their own for the crime of being different, and the newly emerging Nightbane, psychics and arcanists were agreed to be no different from any other Tinker due to their talents. They also agreed that more than ever, the Tinker way of life, avoiding authority and keeping to themselves, would be even more important in the coming years. However, not missing the potential connection between Dark Day and the mirror world, several families volunteered to travel on a semi-permanent basis to the other side. They would watch and report what they saw, just in case something more dire that could harm the Tinkers was waiting. The remaining families would help to resupply them, and pass along information from their own intermittent journeys.

The end of the Convivum would be the final days of peace for the Tinkers. The new Preserver government began their oppressive limitations on the public, demanding more rigid requirements for identification. Having lived off the grid, with no Social Security Numbers or official records, the Tinkers found themselves increasingly challenged to even secure the basic necessities. Local authorities, both human and Nightlanders, regarded

the Tinkers increasingly as disruptive and subversive, and mistreatment began to increase.

One of the families, the Roche, made the mistake of fighting back during a police raid, several Nightbane Tinkers amongst them. The local Preserver-controlled governments wasted no time declaring the Travelers as subversive terrorists, and the new ADA was merciless in hunting them down. Most ended up in prison on fictional charges, trapped and slowly destroyed. In the first three years, the Tinker population dropped from over ten thousand to barely three thousand. Some abandoned the road entirely, choosing the agony of a mundane existence over possible imprisonment or death. The ADA declared the Traveler groups officially destroyed as a terrorist unit, ending the public investigation.

Today, the Tinkers survive by being small and by appearing to be nothing more than worthless scroungers. Unfortunately for the Nightlords, by attempting to destroy the Tinkers as a 'terrorist group,' they managed instead to turn them into one. The Tinkers who endured were the ones who learned how to beat the Nightlords at their own game. Abandoning their ages old tradition of non-involvement, the Tinkers now actively work against the Preserver regime. Their efforts are quiet and small, but their knowledge of the road, the random and constant nature of their movement, and the core of awakened in their ranks, make the Tinkers a dangerous enemy to have made.

## Life in the Tinker Family

The only constant in the families of the Travelers is that of movement. While Tinker camps can exist for months, years and even decades, none are ever constructed on a permanent basis. The closest to such a level the Tinkers will go is to make improvements on sites used on a regular basis by various families, digging garbage pits and latrines, stealing access to local power and water, and stocking caches of firewood. Many camps exist year round, but with different families coming and going, providing a never-ending cycle of new faces over the communal fire.

Most families live either in trucks, trailers or old recreational vehicles and buses that have been outfitted to serve as mobile homes. Tinkers mostly prefer older vehicles, since repairs are usually cheaper and parts are easier to scrounge. Most families have at least one member who is familiar enough with engines to perform basic repairs, and every camp will sport at least one skilled vehicle mechanic. Tinkers normally travel in small family groups, with several generations split between a few vehicles. The occasional camp specialist, such as the priest, will usually accompany a different family from camp to camp, spending time with different elements of Tinker society.

The head of each family is known as 'the Boss.' The Boss is responsible for the family as a whole, keeping track of their movements, organizing meetings as needed, and providing assistance or justice when required. In return, each earning member of the family provides a share of whatever job or scam they might currently be involved in. The Boss is also responsible for helping to arrange marriages between other families, building alliances by blood. Tradition demands that each camp can only have one Boss who is in charge of all the Tinkers in the camp for the duration of their stay, regardless of what family they are from. Most Bosses are well aware of the delicacy of the relationships between the families, and only issue orders to the entire camp when absolutely necessary.

For Tinker families, most travel with some sort of expertise, often handed down through family lines for generations. Legitimate employment includes mechanics, construction and home repair, farming, animal husbandry, ‘tinkering’ (pot repair, knife sharpening, minor home maintenance), tailoring, crafts, music, brewing and general day laboring. Illegal opportunities range from small confidence games, pickpocketing, and crooked gambling, all the way up to burglary, fencing stolen goods, vehicle theft and longer, more complex confidence schemes. Despite rumors, Tinkers avoid violence when possible, and shy away from armed robbery or kidnaping, as well as prostitution or sexual exploitation for blackmail. While some families have committed such crimes in times of desperation, any family who turns to such things as a regular lifestyle won’t last long before being banished from the camps by the Bosses.

Banishment is rare and only done as the result of the worst crimes. Stealing from or cheating another Tinker is the most common reason, since the entire cohesion of the families are linked by trust. A banished Tinker or Tinker family is unwelcome in existing camps, and no aid will be provided to them. They are treated as if they are already dead, and reintegration is unheard of. Most issues are settled by the Boss, and lesser crimes are usually dealt with by a fine, which can keep a Tinker working off his debt for months or years depending on the severity of the crime.

*The awakened* were very quickly accepted by their families, Nightbane included. With a culture as steeped in myth and magic as the Tinkers, the sudden emergence of arcanists, psychics and Nightbane proved less traumatic than in most cultures. Swiftly, new expertise has grown in certain families, with a large ratio of one type of awakened or another. While there is currently only one Nightbane Boss, the reasons are more due to the relative age and experience, as opposed to any prejudice.

Religion is strong amongst the Tinkers; a sort of adapted Catholicism that fits both Irish folklore and rural Southern sensibilities together. The Tinkers are not demonstrative, but take oaths and vows very seriously. Each major family has at least one priest who roams from camp to camp, with part of their home converted into a tiny chapel. Religious ceremonies are conducted in the open air, usually once or twice a week on average.

One of the great strengths of the Tinkers is that they don’t exclude outsiders from joining. Most families have one or two adopted members who were born non-Tinkers but found kinship with them. Adoptions are slow, usually at the discretion of the Boss and after several months or years of traveling with the family. Also common are ‘half-breeds,’ children of Tinkers with non-Tinkers who return to their parents’ culture at a later date. Since Dark Day, the number of adoptions has risen significantly, as more people are driven to a transient lifestyle by the Preservers’ oppressive policies, or are attempting to escape persecution. Most of the Bosses have concerns that some of these new adoptees might be spies for the Nightlords, and keep a very close eye on their new family members.

## The Nightlands

The Tinkers’ knowledge of the Nightlands came first from accidental crossings; points on the road where ley lines created gates between the normal world and the Nightlands. The earliest Tinkers began to map these spots as a warning to others. Invariably, they drew the curious and the adventurous, and small numbers of

Tinkers began to cross over willingly, exploring the Nightlands beyond. Many never returned. Those who did brought back frightening tales of cities mirroring existing American ones, twisted reflections inhabited by a populace of slaves. Stories of monsters in black armor, legions of soulless warriors, and nightmarish creatures of all descriptions wove themselves into Tinker lore.

By the time Dark Day hit, there were already families comfortable with moving through the Nightlands, and some even preferred the dangerous world. They slowly picked up skills that allowed them to move through the populations, identify power structures and live off the land when circumstances required it. During the Convivum, those Tinkers were given a special task: to return to the Nightlands on a permanent basis, supplied and supported by Tinkers in the normal world, and to learn all they could about the Nightlords’ plans.

The persecution Tinkers face in the Nightlands is harsh and brutal, not dissimilar to that of the Gypsies during the Middle Ages. In response, they have learned how to disguise themselves to fit into the Nightlands as Doppelgangers and mirror slaves. They are surprisingly knowledgeable about events in the realm, especially at the regional level, which they share to determine the bigger picture.

Unlike Earthly Tinkers, those who travel the Nightlands have several permanent camps hidden in remote locations. As the regular purges sweep through, they have learned the value of a secure hiding place and cache in which to wait out another attempt to impose discipline. Those camps also serve as re-supply points for Tinkers from the normal world to provide food and equipment.

## The Tarish Order

Magic, real or imagined, has always had a central place in the tradition of the Tinkers. Be it Irish fae or Catholic saints, the Tinkers have long held that curses, charms, and spells are a regular part of life and since Dark Day, have worked them into the center of their society. The Tarish Order is a group of Tinker mages and awakened Nightbane who have united across the families to create a central body to respond to threats of an arcane nature. Each member of the Tarish Order sports a complex tattoo, customized to his or her personal preference, that covers the arms up to the shoulder. Some sport long and intricate sleeves; others, simple, abstract lines; but all of them represent natural, organic forms to show their bonds to the Earth. In the Nightlands, these tattoos emit a soft glow, showing that the magical commitment isn’t severed by the other dimension.

The Tarish Order are the closest thing the Tinkers have to a military order, committed to keeping the avenues open which lead to and from the Nightlands. They move supplies and equipment into the hidden bases, as well as operate as a rescue squad for families who are trapped by Nightlord forces. The Order operates separately from the Bosses, requesting assistance only when necessary. The head of the Order, referred to as the Mac, coordinates her activities with the Bosses secretly, traveling between camps constantly.

## Campaign and Role-playing Notes

The Tinkers are in constant motion, going from city to city, region to region, and even traveling through the Nightlands in their endless movements. Since the Tinkers joined the fight, they have

operated as a classic guerrilla force, striking at vulnerable targets, moving assets and gathering intelligence. Tinker teams will often switch roles continuously, depending on whatever targets of opportunity arise.

A Tinker campaign can involve many different types of adventures. Player characters will have to overcome limited resources, little support, and constant movement in order to strike at the Nightlords. Because of their mobility, Tinkers will come into contact with many of the other shadowy groups in the game, providing them the opportunity to work on many different goals and adventure types.

## Relations with Other Factions

The Tinkers have a great deal of contact with many groups operating in the Nightbane world. Although often looked down by the other groups as untrustworthy or borderline criminals, their ability to move anywhere is often a key asset for others to use.

**The Resistance:** The Resistance often shares missions with the Tinkers, using them when available to bolster their teams. Many members of the Resistance have been saved by Tinker Nightbane, relocated safely away from cities when their Morphus became too well-known and targeted. Several Resistance members have been adopted into Tinker families, making some Resistance leaders suspicious of their true motives.

**The Spook Squad:** The ex-government agencies have little to do with the Tinkers, believing them to be undisciplined, untrustworthy and possibly compromised by the Nightlords. Some spooks maintain relationships with individual Tinkers or Tinker families, and there are some quiet, unofficial pipelines for intelligence and support when necessary. Their uneasy relationship hasn't been helped by Tinker tendencies to funnel information to the Spook Squad, and take advantage of the anticipated operation to acquire valuables and supplies for themselves at the same time.

**The Nocturnes:** The relationship between the Nocturnes and the Tinkers is perpetually uneasy. Vampires are considered to be no better than the Nightlords, and there are many old stories about monsters hunting Tinkers as prey. Their religion and culture creates too many barriers for any effective cooperation. However, they attempt to maintain an uneasy truce of non-interference so long as the Nocturnes avoid Tinker camps or feeding on them. Human followers or dupes are particularly satisfying targets of the short con for the families.

**The Underground Railroad:** While the Tinkers as a community may have joined the struggle against the Nightlords, many individuals and families have not, opting to stay unnoticed and out of the fray. These families have struck an unlikely balance helping Nightbane travel between stops on the Underground Railroad. These Tinkers will take great personal risks to help a fleeing Nightbane, but will not take up weapons and fight directly. The Bosses turn a blind eye to their non-cooperative kin, in part out of their respect for individual choice, and in part because their actions have earned them allies and support for the Tinkers who do fight.

**The Warlords:** The Tinkers and the Warlords cross paths often, more so than with any other faction due to their common wanderlust. However, the similarities end there as most Tinkers find the Warlords' capacity for violence and destruction too brutal to stomach for long. There are some chapters who cleave to the original founding anarchist philosophies and enjoy good relationships

with many families, using them for medical services or as a place to lay low temporarily. However, more violent criminal chapters have exploited Bosses, pushing them to smuggling drugs and guns as the price for moving through their territories. Partially as self-defense, the Tinkers know more about the Warlords' numbers and strength, chapter by chapter, than any other non-member.

**The Seekers:** Seekers will occasionally work with the Tinkers when their research aligns with their travels or as a quiet way to move arcane materials. Unlike the other groups, most Seekers find the Tinkers fascinating, and several have gone out of their way to travel with the families to study them. The Tarish Order has built up a network of relationships with experienced Seekers, occasionally acting as their agents to acquire items or information, in exchange for whatever resources they need.

**The Lightbringers:** The Tinker community is in the process of a long and fractured discussion regarding the Lightbringers. Several families feel strongly that they are holy creatures; angels or at the very least touched directly by the Divine. Others swear they can recognize a con when they see one, and the group are a front for the Nightlords or something even worse, waiting to enter the battle. For the most part, it is the Tinkers that are wary and standoffish, waiting for either hard evidence or an explicit sign to tell them how to take the odd group and their offers for help.

## Tinker Related Skills

**Technical: Language: Cant** – Cant is a pidgin language which incorporates elements of Gaelic, Latin, English, German and regional slang into something incomprehensible to outsiders. It is rarely taught to non-Tinkers, although those who deal with Tinkers will often pick up enough phrases and words to make sense of the general mishmash. **Base Skill:** 50% +5% per level.

**Rogue: Short Con** – Tinkers excel at the short con, which can involve any number of confidence games, sleight of hand tricks and confusing patter in order to quickly separate the unsuspecting from their money. Examples of the short con include trading counterfeit valuables as collateral for other items, running crooked dice, card and shell games on the street, distracting a cashier while exchanging too few dollars for larger notes, and many others. A successful use of the short con skill will net \$3D6x10 in less than a half hour. However, the longer the skill user stays in the same area, or the more frequently they run a con, the likelihood of discovery grows. **Base Skill:** 25% +4% per level. Multiple attempts in the same region within 24 hours are at -10%, cumulative for each extra attempt.

**Rogue: Fortune-telling** – One of the oldest legitimate means for Tinkers to earn money was to follow traveling carnivals and circuses, serving as day laborers to get the shows set up and taken down, as well as offering fortune-telling in the sideshow at night. Over the years, Tinker fortune-tellers grew extremely adept at quick observation, using subtle clues to make their fortunes seem full of details only a psychic could know. The fortune-telling skill does not provide any kind of psychic or precognitive ability. A successful use will either allow the player to pick up information about a target that would normally not be apparent (flecks of officially colored paint from an army base on the pants, nervous motions to a wedding ring suggesting it started to be worn recently, etc.). In the absence of useful details, a successful use can be used in trade for \$2D4x10 worth of money or common goods. **Base Skill:** 25% +4 per level.

**Mechanical: Jury-Rig** – The traveling lifestyle of the Tinkers has forced them to become proficient in patching and mending old or second-hand things like vehicles, appliances, generators, communications equipment and household items. The jury-rig skill allows for the player to make minor repairs to a broken item which will allow it to work properly for up to a week before needing proper fixing. Jury-rigging can be done so long as the player has access to a small tool kit and applies to any mundane common machine. Advanced or complex mechanics, electronics, robotics or modern technology are not capable of being jury-rigged through this skill. **Base Skill:** 40% +4 per level.

**W.P. Shiv** – A shiv is any short blade or improvised stabbing weapon, usually designed to be concealed on the body or as a nondescript item close at hand. Players with W.P. Shiv start with a critical attack on a Natural 19-20 with the shiv, with a 25% chance of stunning the victim for 1D4 melees with a Critical Strike. Most shivs will do no more than 1D4 damage per strike. Supernatural creatures are immune to being stunned.

## Tinker Con Artist O.C.C.

While all Tinkers are often falsely called criminals by locals, there is a strong tradition in several families of producing confidence artists, adept at running short and long cons on unsuspecting victims or ‘marks.’ Many Tinker folk heroes follow the idea of the fast-talking rogue who tricks those more powerful than they into one-sided deals before disappearing with the riches they used to possess. In the modern age of hyper-surveillance, an oppressive police state, and corrupt officials, the stakes have risen perilously high for the con artist to operate.

Each con artist will have his own specialty in which he excels, but all are proficient in a basic skill set. Most apprentice for months or years under a more experienced operator, learning the ropes in exchange for a small cut of the profits. Occasionally, confidence artists will group together to form a ‘crew’ in order to perform larger, more complex cons. A crew will usually contain a number of specialists, such as computer hackers, drivers, demolition men and forgers.

Regardless of their specialties, most con artists have a base set of skills they can fall back on, usually tried and true short cons that they can use to quickly earn money and move on. While most cons are based around money, con artists can be incredibly valuable intelligence assets, getting their hands on blackmail materials, incriminating information, valuable magical items, and other assets. Their flexibility offers a useful tool for any group and any operation in which they are involved, as Con Artists are able to think on their feet, adapt on the fly, and often provide the best way to salvage a broken mission through quick wit and verbal sleight of hand.

### O.C.C. Skills

- Basic Math (+10%)
- Native Language and Literacy (+20%)
- Language: Cant (+20%)
- Radio: Basic (+10%)
- Short Con (+20%)
- Select 2 additional Rogue skills (+15%).
- Computer Operation (+10%)
- Select 1 Weapon Proficiency.

Hand to Hand: Basic

Hand to Hand: Basic can be changed to Expert at the cost of one O.C.C. Related Skill or to Martial Arts or Assassin at the cost of two O.C.C. Related Skills.

**Related Skills:** Select ten other skills. Plus select two additional skills at levels three, six and nine, and one additional skill at levels eleven and thirteen.

Communications: Any (+5%).

Domestic: Any (+5%).

Electrical: Any.

Espionage: Any (+5%).

Mechanical: Basic, Locksmith, and Jury-Rig only.

Medical: First Aid only.

Military: None.

Physical: Any.

Pilot: Any except Jet Aircraft, Jet Fighter and Jet Packs.

Pilot Related: None.

Rogue: Any (+10%).

Science: Math: Advanced only.

Technical: Any.

W.P.: Any.

Wilderness: Any.

**Secondary Skills:** Select six Secondary Skills. Select two additional at levels four and eight.

**Weapons and Equipment:** The Con Artist owns a nondescript used vehicle (2D6 years old) which usually serves as a mobile base of operations, several sets of clothing, including relatively high quality formal wear, a laptop computer, hacked smartphone, a high quality printer, wireless headset, \$2D4x100 in surveillance/communications equipment, and sets of legal documents for several cover identities (passports, driver’s licenses, fake certifications, etc.).

Con Artists will own several small melee weapons that can be concealed, such as knives, brass knuckles and saps. They will own a personal side arm (handgun or pistol) or a shotgun carried in their vehicle with a hundred rounds of ammunition.

**Money:** Starts with \$1D4x1000.

**Experience:** Use the same experience table as the Mystic.

## The Art of the Con

The confidence game is a criminal activity that relies on the manipulation of a target in order to manipulate them out of money or other valuables. Most cons prey on the greed of the target, usually enticing them with a chance to seemingly easily make a pile of money through dubious methods. Typically, the ruse is then discovered by the target after the con artist and their crew have already disappeared from the scene. While some cons are products of a specific era, many have existed in one form or another for hundreds of years, adapted over time to new technologies and social settings.

The central part of any con is the Mark and the Grifter. The Mark is the intended victim of the con, who has been ‘marked’ as the ideal prey for any number of reasons. The Grifter is the con artist himself, who is the central figure responsible for executing whatever the particular con is. What differentiates a con from other types of criminal activities is that proper cons rarely involve coercion. The Mark is commonly tricked into believing that they are the beneficiary of whatever activity the con

involves, and it is usually their personal greed that is the key to following through.

There are traditionally two types of confidence games; the 'short con' and the 'long con.' Each type involves different risks and different levels of reward. Short cons can be usually perpetrated in a matter of minutes while long cons can take days, weeks or even months to come to fruition.

## Short Cons

Short cons are quick confidence schemes, usually requiring no more than one or two people to execute, for small sums of money. Short cons often involve verbal misdirection, greed, or sleight of hand in order to work, and little in terms of equipment or set-up. A deck of cards, a handful of pocket jewelry, or a handful of pocket items are usually all most short cons take.

## Three-Card Monte

There are many variations of the basic Three-Card Monte; the shell game, 'follow the lady,' etc. The game always involves a target item; a queen, a pea, a red marble – which is quickly shuffled under identical pieces and invites the audience to bet on where the target ends up. Straight games rely on the dexterity of the dealer to confuse the bidders during the shuffle so they can't follow the target.

Crooked games have a number of variations used to trick the audience. Sleight of hand can be used to remove the target during the shuffle so all the pieces lack the target. Or the Grifter will intentionally lose several times, making the Mark believe they have broken the system before upping the bet to win significantly more than they have lost previously. Other variations involve the use of an accomplice who has 'broken' the system, and convinces others in the audience to follow them in beating the system before the Grifter starts to bury the target to win. Another variation is to lose regularly, while an accomplice moves through the crowd, pickpocketing the audience. Once people start to notice their missing wallets, the game is broken up by the alert of the police coming.

## Glim-Dropping

'Glim,' a Tinker word for valuables, is the basis of a common short con to play on the greed of others. The Grifter will spend enough time in a business like a restaurant or a bar, and approach the owner with the loss of a valuable item; a piece of jewelry, a personal item, etc. The Grifter will offer a reward through the owner of the establishment for a substantial amount to anyone who finds the item and leaves a contact number. The accomplice will turn up later and 'find' the item in a corner, bringing it up to the owner asking about it. They will be reluctant to give it up to anyone but the owner, until 'persuaded' by the owner to sell them the item for an amount less than the reward. The owner will then later discover the item is worthless and the contact number isn't valid.

## Change Raising

Change raising is a commonly used short con which relies on verbal misdirection or sleight of hand to confuse the Mark into providing much higher change from a transaction than is war-

ranted. The con artist will often target businesses which rely on younger cashiers like those at gas stations who are more susceptible to being fooled.

Change raising has a number of variants. The traditional method is to buy an inexpensive item with a large bill, and once the change has been made, to find additional small bills and offer them back in exchange for a larger bill. During the exchanges back and forth, the Grifter will incorporate the larger bill into the change so that the distracted cashier ends up taking the change for a larger bill made with money from their own till. Another variation is to bring a large number of small bills to exchange for a larger bill, and while counting the bills out loud, use verbal misdirection to jump the count up without being noticed, so the cashier believes they have received the proper amount when in reality it is less than half.

Another popular variation is useful in places where money notes are all a similar color like the United States. The Grifter will flash a large bill and ask for an item behind the counter. When the cashier turns back, they switch the bill with another lesser amount, and the cashier makes change based on the larger bill seen earlier. This is a common ploy used in bars and clubs, where dim lighting, loud music and other distractions increase the chances of success.

## Pig-in-a-Poke

The con dates back to the Middle Ages, where a transaction for a piglet would be made and the pig stuffed into a 'poke' or sack. The sack would then be switched for an identical sack, usually containing a worthless cat or a rat, not to be discovered until the person was long gone from the area. In modern times, the term refers to any con which relies on swapping out an expensive item with a worthless one during a transaction. In most cases, a distraction is arranged or some misdirection employed long enough for the Grifter to replace the box or case the item is in with an identical one, but containing nothing.

## The Murphy Game

The Murphy Game involves the Grifter selling seemingly valuable items at a reduced cost due to extenuating circumstances. The items turn out to be cheap quality, imitations, or junk, and due to the method of sale, Marks are left with no recourse. Most commonly done with electronics or pharmaceuticals, the Grifter will set up a temporary 'store' often out of a vehicle and pitch a story explaining why they are offering the goods at a fraction of the listed price. Most often, excuses like overstock or the items having 'fallen off the truck' are used to justify the discount. The Grifter will often use fake labels or fake sales webpages to justify the bogus 'true value' before offering the discounted price, or plant a shill in the crowd to validate the cost. By the time the items are revealed as worthless, the Grifter has packed up and moved on.

A common variant is used involving illegally sold items, like bootleg software, drugs, weapons, and pornography. Because the items were illegally obtained, the Mark has no legal recourse, including reporting the Grifter to police, without incriminating themselves. Those deals offer significantly more risk to the Grifter, as people who look for illegal items are often more willing to take matters into their own hands to deal with being conned.



# Long Cons

Long cons are elaborate scams, often involving multiple con artists, and are usually aimed at a significantly valuable target. While most fraudulent activities can be considered to have an element of the ‘long con,’ the strictest description involves a crew pitted against a Mark, with a set target, plan, and operational window in which to execute it. Unlike the short con, the long con usually requires time to build trust with the Mark and get the various pieces aligned before completion.

Traditionally, long cons play on greed, pride or desperation. Targets are normally the wealthy or those in positions of power, often already involved in some form of illegal activity. A confidence artist will identify the main weakness of their mark, and then craft the con in order to exploit it. At that point, a ‘crew’ will be assembled in order to meet the needs of the job. Each job requires different experts, roughly grouped as the following:

- **The Shill** – The Shill is a ‘third party’ who is seemingly unaffiliated with the other grifters and is meant to encourage the mark to act in a specific way. They are usually planted at the scene to react in a way that authenticates the con.
- **The Roper** – The Roper is meant to work closely with the Mark, managing their connection and keeping them interested and engaged in the con. The Roper usually has some kind of in depth knowledge in the interests of the Mark.
- **The Fixer** – The Fixer or Fixers are flexible Grifters who serve multiple roles in the con, often switching roles and providing distractions. The best Fixers are blandly anonymous, able to interact around the Mark without ever being really noticed. Common roles include waiters, private security, cab drivers, cleaners and delivery people.
- **The Face** – The Face is the opposite of the Fixer, designed specifically to be noticed. While attractive men and women are sometimes used, the Face can often be a larger than life figure like a fake Texas billionaire or Russian high roller there to occupy the time of the Mark while the con is in progress.
- **The Outside Man** – The Outside Man adds an extra level to the con; usually acting as some kind of neutral position of authority like a fake Police Officer, Federal Agent or representative of a government agency like the IRS or US Customs. Sometimes they are there to pressure the Mark to react without thinking, or provide an escape for the rest of the crew by making the Mark believe the authorities have stepped in.
- **The Floater** – The Floater has a variety of roles, usually as the last resort or back-up plan in case the main con is compromised. The Floater is usually inserted into the scene as an unconnected figure days or weeks before the con as staff, and then is ready to step in during the con.
- **The Specialist** – The Specialist can fulfill any number of roles, from computer hacking, forger, getaway driver or muscle. Specialists normally fulfil their role and only get involved with the Mark in the worst case scenario.

## Long Con Types

There are many examples of the long con, but in most cases, the central point of a long con is to draw the Mark into some kind of deal which seems to provide them whatever they want – money, power, specific items – in return for working with the Grifters in some kind of elaborate scheme, often providing some-

thing equally valuable up front. The greater the return, normally the more initial investment and time is needed to put the con together. Major financial cons, like the Ponzi scheme operated by Bernie Madoff, can take tens or hundreds of millions of dollars to establish, in return for billions. Generally, the upper limit for any crew even with major or magical resources is high seven figures. Anything more almost always requires a major public presence and no ability to disappear quietly later.

## The Wire Scam

The wire scam, also known as the wire game, used to be a popular con in the age of telegraphs. Western Union agents were bribed to provide a delay when transmitting track results from the national wires to local betting houses to allow someone with advanced knowledge of the results to place last minute bets on the winners. The Mark would be enticed into the deal by the Grifter, who would often position himself as a poor and disgruntled employee of the betting house. The Mark would be encouraged to place small bets to test the validity of the system. Once significantly convinced the scam was the real thing, a major event would be targeted as the perfect time to make a huge bet which would pay out a massive amount and possibly break the house, of which the Grifter would demand a cut. At the last minute, the message would be garbled so the massive bet – often pulled from loan sharks – would be placed on the wrong horse. Often to cover their tracks, a raid with fake police officers would be set at the same time, leaving the Mark to ‘escape’ without his money while the house was dismantled and the crew disappeared behind him. This con has come back into favor with underground betting events, which employ private feeds such as no-holds-barred martial art matches or illegal blood sports which operate on delay and can be compromised in the same way.

## The Mona Lisa Con

The Mona Lisa Con draws its name from the theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre in 1911. According to the story, Eduardo de Valfierno had six exact replicas of the Mona Lisa made before hiring a crew to steal the painting. Using the publicity of the theft to ‘authenticate’ the painting, as well as his knowledge of the heist, Valfierno sold the fakes at high prices to private collectors all over Europe. It wasn’t until the real Mona Lisa was recovered in 1913 that the forgeries were revealed. Mona Lisa Cons center around a rare and valuable object, usually art or jewelry, which are then stolen or lost, and the fakes sold individually or at private auction. Because the items are illegally obtained, it makes it much harder to have them properly authenticated and easier to pass the forgery off as the real thing.

## The Golden Gate Bridge Con

The Golden Gate Bridge Con dates back to the turn of the 19th century, where investors were duped into buying shares in high risk, high reward properties which turned out to not exist or to not be for sale, such as the famous scheme to sell shares in a soon to be privatized Golden Gate Bridge. This con usually involves two stages – building the Mark’s interest in the deal, usually by framing it as being slightly illegal, like having advance knowledge of a local endangered species about to be removed from the endangered list which will allow the land to be developed.

The second part will have the Mark and other ‘investors’ – usually the Grifter’s crew – set up the investment process during an artificially limited window of time and then transfer the money to ‘buy’ the land. Then, something goes wrong with the deal, and the Mark discovers the Grifter is long gone and his investment to have been false or worthless.

There are many variations on any long con, but in general, long cons involve three phases; first, identifying the Mark and building his interest in the deal. Second, the transaction goes down in a limited time frame, usually to encourage the Mark to feel more secure. Finally, there’s a ‘kiss off’ where the Mark is scared away from the scene long enough for the crew to make their escape, often with a fake bust by law enforcement, a staged death of the Grifter or Face that makes the Mark culpable, or simple confusion in which the crew disappears. The best long cons are those where the Mark never knows they were conned, believing themselves to have been the victim of bad luck when trying to take advantage of a sure thing. In most cases, these cons are built around some kind of illegal transaction so that the Mark can’t involve the police without incriminating himself in illegal activity.

The media has popularly put the long con in the same realm as the heist, where a crew will use a mix of technology, grifting techniques and specialists in order to steal from a bank or a casino. Some Grifters are heist specialists, but in general, even sophisticated heists are not considered true long cons.



## Official Source Material for *Beyond the Supernatural*<sup>TM</sup>

By Matthew Clements

Based on ideas and suggestions by Kevin Siembieda.

*Owen pulled his threadbare coat close around him, waiting for the light at the crosswalk to change. He could feel a new hole forming through the patched fibers, cold air slowly seeping in. A few of the other pedestrians glanced over at him and his shopping cart full of empty cans, but they hurried on their way as the ‘walk’ indicator lit up and the passing cars came to a halt.*

*He pushed the cart with its one bad wheel, turning away from the headlights, the people on their way home, the witches, pumpkins and skeletons that had been cut out of construction paper and placed in the shop windows. That happy, functional world was all behind him. Ahead were rows of shadowy, rundown buildings. The windows here were broken out or boarded up, the few that remained intact too greasy and sooty to see through. Down here, no one had bothered to decorate for Halloween; the old factory district was scary enough just the way it was.*

*A rusted awning sheltered the alley ahead. In the dirt and dust beneath it had been left two tracks, just the width of his cart, winding around the occasional broken cinder block or piece of discarded chainlink fencing, underscored by his faint, shuf-*

*fling footprints between them. The cart slipped naturally into the grooves that had been made by dozens of earlier trips. Owen had told himself that he would find a homeless shelter before the weather really turned, but it had been a cold October already and he was still living out of an office in the back of one of the abandoned factories.*

*Near the factory’s side door the streaks in the dirt were interrupted. Something had either crawled or been dragged across the grimy ground, leaving a wet trail behind. Owen grimaced, despite the meager conditions he was accustomed to. Some wounded animal might have chosen his hiding spot as the perfect secluded place to go and die. He opened the door carefully and ducked inside.*

*Everything seemed just as he had left it. Owen slid his cart and cans next to the door, covering them with a ripped-up rug just in case anyone looked in. The illumination from one remaining streetlight lit up the windows, casting a dim, blue glow throughout the dusty factory floor. In the glow he could see another slick, wet path across the worn concrete. Something was definitely in here; he only hoped it had stayed out of his little office area.*

*Owen had blocked off the office with a piece of graffiti-sprayed plywood, probably fallen out of one of the upper windows. He shouldered it aside and slipped through the door.*

*Inside was a rotting, scratched-up desk and boxes filled with old newspapers. They were dried and yellowed and flaked apart when he picked them up, but still made a decent bed once they were spread around. Owen had placed a pair of candles in the openings of a cinder block; his only light inside the dark office.*

*He sat back on the pile of papers and removed his boots. Owen rubbed his aching feet, felt his stomach rumble. Tomorrow he would try to find something better to eat. Tomorrow he would try to get some help.*

*One of his hands brushed against something sticky in the dark and Owen instantly recoiled. He stood up, squinting into the shadows made by the flickering candlelight. Owen thought he could see something moving...*

*It grabbed him with writhing tentacles and clasping claws. Inhuman eyes glinted in the dark. Newspaper fragments milled up into the air, drifting down around the pulsing, monstrous mass as it settled over Owen.*

\* \* \*

*The school bus rumbled away, wafting diesel fumes and exhaust in its wake. Franco’s friends made faces at him from the back seat. He returned the gestures as the bus rounded a corner, on to the next stop.*

*Franco resettled his backpack on his shoulders and proceeded down the familiar sidewalk. His house was on the edge of the neighborhood; right across the street the vacant apartments and abandoned factories began. Every day his mother told him not to take the shortcut that led through the boarded-up alley, but every day he did. It was just too convenient.*

*He kicked an empty paint can out of the way, watching as it clattered down the alley. Something moved to Franco’s right. He tightened his grip on his backpack.*

*It was a homeless man with tattered clothing. His shoes were beginning to come apart, his coat was stained and flea-bitten – but he wore a bright green monster mask with a happy smile and big teeth.*

*"Happy Halloween young man!"*

*"Your...your costume is scary."*

*"Isn't it supposed to be?"*

*"I guess."*

*The man removed a cloth bag from within his coat. He pulled out a candy bar and held it at arm's length. "Do you want some candy? Trick or treat!"*

*"I don't think so..."*

*"Come on. Take some candy. It's Halloween..."*

*"Halloween isn't 'til tomorrow."*

*"I won't tell if you won't."*

*Franco reached out hesitantly for the candy bar. He took hold of it – and the stranger grabbed his wrist with a grip like a vice. The candy bag yawned open and he could see it was full of writhing maggots and broken glass. Franco looked both ways for another adult, a friend from school, anyone walking by, but there was no one to help him.*

\* \* \*

*The sun slowly sank back behind the rows of buildings as the day wore on. As night approached the streets filled with little costumed heroes and animals, army men and cowboys and princesses. They toted bags full of candy around, going from door to door, watchful parents trying to keep up.*

*Three slightly older kids were out on their own, weaving between the groups of parents and toddlers, hitting all the houses and loading up on as many goodies as possible.*

*A child in a scary monster mask approached them.*

*"I know a place that's giving away tons of candy!" He held up his overloaded trick-or-treat bag.*

*"Where?"*

*"This way. Follow me!"*

*He led them down the alley, away from the eyes of the other trick-or-treaters.*

*"What's your name, kid?"*

*"Franco." He forged ahead, further and further into the abandoned factories, waving for them to follow.*

*"Are you sure this is the right way?"*

*"Yeah, come on!"*

*Franco stopped at the side door. Another child in a monster mask emerged from within, holding her own bulging candy bag. She hurried off into the shadows without saying a word.*

*"See? I told you!" Franco urged them on.*

*Inside, other masked children were passing back and forth in the dark, all carrying their own bundles. Up ahead, one was leading another child by the hand deeper into the factory. The rest were either coming or going, silent, not speaking to each other, walking alone.*

*"I don't know about this..." one of the older children remarked.*

*"It's a haunted house!" added Franco. "Isn't it scary?"*

*The older kids exchanged looks. "Let's just get the candy and get out of here," said the most determined.*

*Franco opened a door to the factory's dark, cavernous central area. "We're almost there."*

*They pushed past Franco, standing near the entrance. The room was empty.*

*"There's nothing in here." They sounded double-crossed.*

*The door slammed shut behind them. The shadowy forms of other kids appeared around the edges of the factory, indistinct, heads shaped oddly by the varying masks they wore.*

*The three older children turned to make a run for it. One pushed Franco aside – but a grown-up in a dirty coat and a monster mask of his own was blocking the door.*

*Franco stood back up. The mask over his face seemed to smile wickedly as if it were alive. "Time to trick-or-treat."*

\* \* \*

*Detective Miller stopped his unmarked patrol car next to a 'no-parking' sign, paying it no mind. There they were, right on time. Two hipster weirdos in long coats, different as night and day, but wearing the same outfits and draped in the same sense of self-importance.*

*Sara was a mystery; a relative newcomer to the big city, Miller was pretty sure, but beyond that there wasn't much he could discern. A year ago she had helped him solve a particularly puzzling murder. No motive, no suspects, no evidence that could form a trail – until Sara walked into the station one day with a sketch of the killer, claiming that she had seen it in a dream. No one else took her seriously, but Miller was under enough pressure to close the case that he spent a long night looking through mugshots until he found a local hoodlum who was a dead-ringer for the drawing. They caught the guy with his bags packed, a taxi waiting in his driveway, about to hop on the next plane out of town. Sara was right, there was no explanation for it, and the shy girl Miller had met came in weird clothes and haircuts from that day after. Some of the folks in the neighborhood had a kind of reverence for her, said she was a fortune-teller or some such nonsense. Miller didn't know what to think, and he honestly didn't care as long as her information was good.*

*Along with the wardrobe that could have been straight out of a comic book, Sara was accompanied by 'Douglas' the next few times Miller came to her for answers. Douglas was a cousin or old friend or something, very protective, but very much a subordinate.*

*He didn't really know what to think about the way they dressed, but they...knew things. Things that couldn't be explained. Or at least Sara did. Douglas had a brick-like simplicity to him, not a bad guy, but Miller had pulled him out of the drunk tank more than a few times at Sara's insistence. No one whispered about him telling fortunes or reading palms – but the unit patch tattooed on his arm made his history as a combat veteran plain enough for others to see.*

*"Hello again, detective." Sara said as he stepped out of the car.*

*"Hello Sara. Douglas," he nodded. Douglas returned the nod from behind ridiculous sunglasses that made him look like he was in a low-budget action movie.*

*"Who can I find for you this time, detective?"*

*"Right to the chase. I like that." Miller fished out the missing-person report he had brought and unclipped a photo from it.*

*"Franco DeSilva. Ten years old. He went missing on Devil's Night. The kid's friends and the bus driver all saw him get off the bus, but he never came home from school."*

*"I sense there's more you're not telling me."*

*Miller leaned in close. "I've got six more reports like this from last night, and two worried parents back at the station that are fil-*

ing another one right now. My captain is throwing a fit. He's got the mayor talking about declaring a local emergency."

"There were many strange spirits out last night."

"Listen, I'm out of time. Can you help me or not?"

"We are in service to all mankind." She and Douglas both looked deadly serious as she said it.

"Is that a yes?"

\* \* \*

"Let's go," Sara said, watching Miller's car pull away.

"Do you know what we're looking for?" asked Douglas.

"Something bad. Very bad. I can feel it."

"Last night was Halloween. That might be messing with your... senses."

"I know the difference between a malignant entity and a kid in a costume. Come on."

They walked down the street, past the bus stop, past the decorated shop windows, past the discarded candy wrappers of all kinds. It wasn't long before they reached the alley, leading back into the quiet and empty factory district. Sara stopped.

"Is this it?" Douglas asked.

"They were here. I can feel it."

They proceeded into the derelict factories. Douglas knelt next to a muddy patch. Little shoeprints were pressed into the mud, going in both directions. He pointed further down the alley and they continued in careful silence.

Every door nearby was boarded up, except for one that clattered in the breeze, drawing them in to investigate. The child-sized prints led in and out.

Douglas looked up. Sara nodded. There was a look of hesitation on her face, even fear, but Douglas knew she wouldn't turn back. He eased the big revolver he carried out from under his coat and checked the chamber. Sara could be the brains of the operation; Douglas had his own skill-set that she would never fully understand.

He booted the door open, letting rays of sunshine light up the interior. It was just what to expect from an abandoned building: dust and dirt and broken glass. It seemed empty and unused, but Sara could sense people inside. Lots of them.

"Be careful. We're not alone in here," she whispered.

Douglas silently agreed. They moved further in, him clutching the big pistol, her searching around with a flashlight.

Something ran by. Something fast and...short? Douglas cocked the hammer on his revolver.

"Wait!" Sara reached out and caught the runner, dragged it back, kicking and protesting. Douglas holstered his gun and took hold of the little terror from her; a child in a Halloween monster mask.

"Just a kid." He adjusted his grip. "Hold on, buddy. No one's gonna hurt you." The little monster-boy struggled and fought, trying to snap at Douglas with its mask-mouth full of sharp teeth.

"It is a child. But...there's something wrong with him."

"I figured that out for myself." He set the kid aside, dangling by the back of his jacket from a coat-hook extending from a nearby door. The monster-faced child struggled and lashed out, but he was too short to free himself.

There was a clatter up ahead and they both turned their heads in time to see another little monster run by.

"Don't let it get away!" Sara shouted.

They chased the child-like, impish figure into the central factory floor – and stopped.

Whatever mystery was at the center of all this, here it was, sitting right in front of them in full majestic horror. Tentacles twitched back and forth, wrapped around girders and support beams. A mound of eyes and gnashing teeth connected the tentacles together into a malformed monstrosity, a creature born of nightmares. From the shadows watched a dozen children with oversized monster heads and pointed ears – waiting for some unknown cue.

The monster's clusters of eyes all fixed on Sara at once. Douglas heard her gasp in surprise and shock; she collapsed in pain, mumbling incoherently. He wasted no time blasting all six shots into the thing, knocking out an eye or two but doing no real damage. Douglas took cover behind a crate, fished out a speedloader, emptied his revolver and replaced the bullets.

"Sara?" he called, but there was no response. He snuck a look over the crate, popping back down as a tentacle swept overhead and smashed into it. Looking around the side, he saw the child-figures closing in on her, still caught in some kind of shock.

Douglas ran to her side, shoving the little goblin-children away, trying to drag Sara to safety. There were so many of them, though, grasping, pushing – pushing them towards the mass of tentacles at the center of the room. Its eyes focused on them, little clawed feelers clicking in the air. Douglas dug his heels into the ground, but it was no use. A tentacle snaked forward, curling around one leg.

The other tentacles wrapped around him, pulling him in, smothering, crushing, unrelenting. Douglas tried to scream but his mouth was covered in the suffocating grip. He flailed wildly about until his fingers closed around the revolver's handle. The trigger was there, somewhere...

Flashes lit the room as the gun went off over and over, punching a half-dozen holes in the ceiling. Beams of sunlight poured in. The monster's flesh steamed where the light touched it, its scream was full of agony and terror. It wasn't enough, though. There was no air. Things began to go dark for Douglas...

Sara fought free of her tiny attackers and reached one hand upwards. She grit her teeth, focusing her inner energy, grasping for the roof with her mind. Tiles and rust sprinkled down, followed by wood and steel supports. The child-monsters backed away, shielding their eyes as a massive hole was torn in the ceiling. The sun's rays streamed into the factory like a waterfall of light, burning the creature, scalding its evil hide. Vapor boiled up into the air and it howled with a rage not of this world. The last thing Sara saw was a ball of light, ever intensifying, before the entire world around her went white.

Her vision returned – showing Douglas, struggling for breath. In the light they could see children scattered around the room, slowly regaining their bearings. The 'masks' that had concealed their faces were gone. One adult, clad in the worn-out garments of a derelict, sat up, disoriented.

"Where am I?" he asked. "Who are you?" The little children all around him looked just as confused.

## Gleaners

Gleaners are supernatural predators that have evolved a very specific ritual as part of their hunting patterns. On Earth they appear on *Devil's Night* (the night before Halloween), harnessing

increased levels of magical energy as the planet begins to enter *All Hallow's Eve* (Halloween). After Halloween, on *All Saints' Day*, the Gleaner has completed the prey-gathering portion of the ritual, and slowly builds up energy until it has enough power to send itself out of our dimension and back to its own.

Once a Gleaner manifests itself on our world, it will seek out a lair and a first victim, often at the same time. Drunks, junkies and homeless people often fall prey to a Gleaner's first attack. The initial victim's residence usually makes a good lair, but sometimes victims do not live alone or must travel frequently as part of their work routine. While not particularly intelligent, Gleaners have powers that allow them to read and sense the beings around them, giving them a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of human behavior and interaction.

For Gleaners, Halloween is the perfect time to manifest themselves and gather prey. Ley lines and magic energy levels run high during the three day period covering Devil's Night, Halloween and All Saints' Day. This boost of energy allows Gleaners to travel to our dimension and find a lair in time to begin drawing in victims. At this stage, Halloween itself provides prey in the form of children trick-or-treating and costumed revelers heading out to parties. The large numbers of people and concealed identities works to a Gleaner's advantage, making it difficult for others to tell when victims go missing.

Once someone has been lured into the lair of the Gleaner they are enveloped by the beast in a horrifying embrace that results in mental domination. Children are the monster's favorite prey. They are also easy prey, simpler and more open-minded than adults. Their curiosity and naivete make them susceptible to the wiles of a Gleaner and its puppet-like Mind Slaves, who are used to perform simple errands and trick others into entering the Gleaner's lair. Mind Slaves' faces are transformed into monstrous versions of themselves, but on Halloween most people assume the frightening visage is just a mask.

The creatures have left few traces over the years. In ages past, superstitions claimed that just speaking their name would summon Gleaners, so written records and even tales passed by word of mouth are incredibly rare. In modern times, the general public dismisses such stories as urban legends and myths; tall-tales told to frighten kids or scare the gullible around campfires. Gleaners leave no evidence behind when they disappear, and by that point it is too late to rescue a Gleaner's Mind Slaves anyway. Psychics can sense the Gleaner's evil impulses and hypnotic control web, as can magic users with the Sense Evil spell. Other heroes, police officers or family members of victims might all stumble upon a Gleaner's lair while looking for missing people.

## Gleaner Stats

**Also Known As:** All-Hallow's Beast, Street Snatcher.

**Alignment:** Diabolic.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 2D6+3 (predatory animal intelligence), M.A. 2D6+9, M.E. 2D6+1, P.S. 4D6+7 (Supernatural), P.P. 1D4+5, P.E. 3D6+9, P.B. 1D4, Spd 2D4, but reduce by half when the monster captures four or more Mind Slaves.

**Hit Points:** 1D6x10 + P.E. attribute number.

**S.D.C.:** 3D6x10 +10 per each Mind Slave.

**Size:** Tentacles have a reach of 6 feet (1.8 m), +1 foot (0.3 m) for each new Mind Slaves; double their length on All Saints' Day when the Gleaner has numerous Mind Slaves and is flush with psychic energy.

**Weight:** 250-5,000 lbs (112.5-2,250 kg), increases in size as it collects additional Mind Slaves.

**Horror Factor:** 13

**P.P.E.:** 80+1D4x10

**I.S.P.:** 2D4x10, but gains another 10 I.S.P. for each Mind Slave the Gleaner currently has under its control.

**Appearance:** When the Gleaner first arrives on Earth, it resembles a three foot (0.9 m) tall, human dwarf with a round belly, short arms, and human-looking head on a very short and thick neck. Under its two arms (each finger of its hands tipped in a black claw) are three tentacles, six total. They are usually hidden under a drape of clothing, blanket, rags or an oversized coat the monster finds on the street or which has been taken from one of its victims. From a distance, one might mistake the Gleaner as a child.

The creature grows 25% larger and uglier with every new Mind Slave. Quickly, its belly balloons like a pumpkin to become a blob of pulsating flesh with six large tentacles; its short legs and feet quickly lost in the bulbous mass of its body. After the Gleaner has captured at least three Mind Slaves, its human head disappears. In its place is a tangle of 2D4+4 short, eye stalks clustered close together. In the center of the blob a massive, grinning, jack-o-lantern-like maw appears. It is filled with dagger-sized teeth. The tentacles also grow larger with each new Mind Slave, and are used to drag its blob of a body as well as to ensnare prey and fight enemies. The arms also grow, but remain short compared to its body and the tentacles.

**Average Life Span:** Immortal. Though Gleaner may be 'destroyed' on Earth, its life essence returns to its home dimension where it will require 2D4x10 years to reestablish a physical body and begin to search for prey again on the mortal plane.

**Behavior:** Slow, even immobile once they have reached a significant size, Gleaners find a location to designate as their lair and feeding ground and stay put. They use their Mind Slaves to gather new victims and items that can be used as lures to attract human prey. Gleaners that manifest on Earth follow a highly stylized ritual, appearing on Devil's Night, catching as many victims as possible on Halloween when the streets are full of children, then disappearing at midnight on All Saints' Day, their living prey never to be seen again.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 1,000 feet (305 m), and impervious to poison/toxins/drugs, smoke, gas and cold.

**Create Mind Slave (special):** The Gleaner holds its target still and focuses for 1D4+4 melee rounds (45-120 seconds). After the first melee round, the victim must save vs mind control/psionic attack, but requires a 16 or greater to save. Drunks and drug users are -3 to save and children are -2. If the victim saves the first time, the Gleaner keeps pressing its mental enslaving attack again and again until it succeeds (twice per melee round). If the target is not removed from the Gleaner's grasp within the initial two minutes of 'stillness' (when the victim is held still), he or she becomes its loyal Mind Slave! Once enslaved, the only way to released all the Mind Slaves is to kill the Gleaner. Mind Slaves follow the Gleaner's commands, working as helpers and extensions of the monster's physical body. Their faces take on the appearance of a monster or grotesque and exaggerated human caricature. On Halloween, such faces are presumed to be a *mask*, and nobody thinks twice about it, especially when the Mind Slave is a child out

'trick-or-treating.' Only in this case, the Mind Slave seeks more children to lure into the clutches of the Gleaner.

If the Gleaner is still alive by midnight on All Saints' Day it will vanish back to its home dimension, taking all of its Mind Slaves with it. Safe in its alien realm the horrid monster feeds upon its Mind Slave until each is consumed. Returning returns in a year's time, next Devil's Night to hunt for new meat.

**Dimensional Return (special):** When children start to go missing and a Gleaner is suspected, the heroes only have 1-3 nights to find and destroy the monster. On All Saint's Day the Gleaner stops actively searching for more Mind Slaves and summons all of its current Mind Slaves to its location. They will know where, because each is in mental contact with their malevolent puppet master. The Gleaner begins to focus on returning to its home dimension, preparing itself physically and gathering strength and energy. **At midnight**, the Gleaner vanishes, along with any Mind Slaves under its control. There is no known way to recover a Mind Slave after a Gleaner has departed this dimension. No ritual or magic is required. If still alive, the Gleaner vanishes with all its victims in tow.

**Attacks per Melee:** Eight.

**Damage:** Tentacle Swipe: 2D6 S.D.C.

Tentacle Crush: 1D6 S.D.C. per melee round until the target breaks free or the tentacle is severed.

Bite: 2D6 S.D.C. (-3 to strike due to limited mobility)

Claw Scratch: 2D4 S.D.C.

**Bonuses:** The Gleaner is impervious to possession, illusion and hypnotic suggestion, and +5 to save vs all forms of Mind Control.

**Vulnerabilities:** Exposure to sunlight inflicts 4D6 S.D.C. per melee round, and the creature must hide from sunlight, even on an overcast day, or suffer damage. Exposure to the sun on All Saints' Day inflicts 1D6x10 S.D.C. per melee round. Fire and fire-based attacks does 50% greater damage than normal, and weapons made of silver or coated in silver do double damage. Magic and physical attacks all do full damage. When destroyed, the body turns into a pool of snail slime.

**Magic:** None; see Natural Abilities.

**Psionics:** Empathy (4), Induce Pain (2), Mind Block (4), See Aura (6), See the Invisible (4), Sense Magic (3), Sixth Sense (2), and Suggestion (2).

**Value:** None. Gleaners are terrifying supernatural predators, and defeating them eliminates all trace of their physical bodies, leaving nothing behind to be collected. A live Gleaner might fetch a high price from a demon or powerful, evil, supernatural being as a kind of pet.

**Habitat:** In natural environments Gleaners seek out caves, swamps and dark forests. In cities (their favorite hunting ground) they prefer abandoned buildings, sewers, crawlspaces and any kind of urban ruin.

**Hunting Range:** Gleaners are believed to have only appeared on Earth and seem to be connected to the human ritual of Halloween. However, their interdimensional nature means they could theoretically find a way into almost any dimension.

**Allies:** None. Gleaners are very territorial and will attack anything that comes near them.

**Enemies:** Paladins/monster hunters, Psychic Sensitives and any psychic with Empathy, law enforcement, champions of good and heroes of all kinds.

# Dead Reign™

## New Character Occupations and Encounters

### Optional Material for the Dead Reign™ RPG

By Jeff Duncan

## Eight New (Optional) Survivor Occupations

### Professional Athlete

This character was a professional (occasionally high profile) athlete in one of the following sports: Baseball, Basketball, Football, Hockey, Soccer or Tennis. Sports in countries other than America may have the same level of notoriety (G.M. discretion).

**Character Note:** If allowed by the G.M., a player's character has a 2% chance of being recognized as a famous sports figure plus an additional 1% chance per 5 points of M.A., rounding down; thus a character with an M.A. of 14 would have a 4% chance of being recognized, a character with an M.A. of 16 would equal a 5% chance. Being recognized as a celebrity athlete

can have its benefits as well as its challenges, from hero worship to unwanted attention, depending on the character's outlook and disposition. Also, people who know him or her as a pro-athlete may be more willing to follow his lead and suggestions.

**Occupational Skills:** Athletics, Body Building, Running, Climbing or Swimming (+10%), Public Speaking, Hand to Hand: Expert (may select Martial Arts by expending one Elective Skill), Automobile or Motorcycle (+10%), Wardrobe & Grooming or Performance (+10%), and select one additional physical skill, Ancient Weapon Proficiency and one modern W.P. of choice.

**Elective Skills:** Select any six from the following skill categories: Communication, Domestic, Medical (First Aid only, +5%), Physical, Rogue, Technical and Weapon Proficiencies, ancient & modern.

**Secondary Skills:** Select two from the standard available categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 3, 6, 9,12 and 15.

**Special Bonus:** +2 to P.P. and P.S., and +12 to S.D.C.



Pay in the Old World: Good to outrageous; even the very lowest earning athletes of the most popular sports earn the higher range (typically 6 figures a year) of a high middle-class family. Many were multi-millionaires.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. Athletes of this caliber are in tip-top physical shape, making them excellent fighters and zombie slayers. The character may have other useful skills.

## Cycle Courier

This character was a bicycle courier in large city. Before the zombie wave hit, the character was most likely a race cycling enthusiast or may have been an active competitor in street or BMX racing and is a person not usually under the age of 30.

Occupational Skills: Bicycle (+30%), Athletics or Aerobic Athletics, Running, General Repair and Maintenance (+10%), Road Wise (+16%), and select 2 additional physical skills.

Elective Skills: Select six total from the standard available skill categories, but the character gets a +5% bonus on Domestic, Physical, and Technical.

Secondary Skills: Select four from the standard available skill categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Special Bonus: +12 to Spd on a bicycle, +1 to P.E.

Pay in the Old World: Average or just a few dollars above minimum wage, many had another part-time or full-time job.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. Usually pretty good, especially because a courier has a very good knowledge of the streets (of the city they worked at least) and is able to quickly and covertly travel distance of many miles as long as the roads are in decent shape.

## Movie Megastar

The character is a first-rate actor who has starred in a number of mainstream or mega-blockbuster films or popular, highly rated television series; Academy (or perhaps Emmy) awards and nominations are optional.

Character Note: If allowed by the G.M., a player's character has a 5% chance of being recognized as a famous actor or actress plus an additional 1% chance per 3 points of M.A., rounding down; thus a character with an M.A. of 14 would have a 9% chance of being recognized. G.M.s and players should keep in mind that how famous figures appear on screen vs how they are in real life might be very different. Additionally, those considered a full-blown movie megastar are usually over the age of 30.

Occupational Skills: Aerobic Athletics and Body Building, Dance (+10%), Impersonation (+15%), Disguise (+5%), Impersonate Voice & Sound (+20%), Play Musical instrument or Art (+10%), Public Speaking, Performance (+25%), Seduction or Gambling (+15%), Sing or Dance (+20%), and Wardrobe & Grooming (+20%).

Elective Skills: Select five from the standard available categories, but the character gets a +2% bonus to Communication and Technical Skill selections.

Secondary Skills: Select two from the standard available categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 4, 8, and 12.

Special Bonus: +3 to M.A. and +1D6 to P.B.

Pay in the Old World: Outrageous. A Movie Megastar could demand tens of millions of dollars for a single movie!

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. G.M.s and players should keep in mind that these characters may have access to many different types of resources immediately following the wave. Also depending on the character's popularity, many "regular folks" may look to the character for leadership or guidance.

## Professional Escort or Model

The character had made their living as essentially professional arm (eye) candy. Many of these characters understand the seedier side of human nature all too well, which is an advantage.

Occupational Skills: Athletics or Aerobic Athletics, Dance or Sing (+10%), Performance (+10%), Barter (+20%), Seduction (+20%), Streetwise (+15%), Wardrobe & Grooming (+5%), W.P. Knife.

Elective Skills: Select six from the standard available skill categories plus Rogue, but the character gets a +5% bonus on any Domestic, Physical, or Technical skill selection.

Secondary Skills: Select four from the standard available skill categories, +1 additional skill at levels 2, 5, 8, and 13.

Special Bonus: +1 to M.A. and +1D4 to P.B.

Pay in the Old World: Varied with the level of success and the character's good looks, but generally was pretty decent.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. Most have excellent people skills and depend on these skills to get what they want.

## Game Designers and Novelists

This character either made their living in the field of computer game design and/or as a role-playing game designer/world builder. In the aftermath of the wave the characters are good at research and excellent problem-solvers. Most possess a broad range of useful knowledge and skills. This character is inventive, resourceful and tends to think outside the box, coming up with ideas and conjecture that may be useful to a group. This character is also a natural born storyteller and useful in helping pass a scary night and entertaining frightened and battle weary survivors and teammates with interesting stories and fun facts.

Occupational Skills: Creative Writing (+20%), Technical Writing or Computer Programming (+15%), Art (+5%), Computer Operation (+10%), Business and Finance (+5%), History (+10%), Research (+25%), Public Speaking (+5%) and one skill of choice from Physical or Weapon Proficiency.

Elective Skills: Select four total from the standard available skill categories, but the character gets a +5% bonus on any Domestic or Technical skill selection.

Secondary Skills: Select four from the standard available skill categories, +1 additional skill at levels 2, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13.

Special Bonus: +1 to I.Q. and +1 to M.E. In addition, a Game Designer's eye for detail and noticing story related elements, gives him a +1 Perception Roll bonus; +2 on Perception Rolls to recognize when someone's story seems implausible, unlikely or fishy (untrue and likely to be a lie).

Pay in the Old World: A career depended heavily on success or failure and the popularity of the medium; could have done very well or been literally down to their last buck. While some had sponsorship and corporate funding, many more were independent operators (fighting the good fight). **Additional (satirical) Note:**



Independent operators with fewer than 6 full-time employees (and/or 30 years in the business) should get W.P. Whip; how else could they have gotten any work done?

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. The character may have other useful skills.

## Weapons Expert: Gunsmith

The character either owned an armaments business (10%) or worked for a gun repair shop (90%) which specialized in gun repairs and modifications. Many gunsmith shops also have the knowledge and capability for custom, specialty design and machine reloading.

Occupational Skills: Basic Mechanics (+10%), Basic Electronics (+5%), Weapons Engineer (+10%), Munitions Expert (+25%), Computer Operation and Recognize Weapon Quality (+35%). Characters may select 5 modern (firearms) weapon proficiencies.

Elective Skills: Select six total from the standard available skill categories, but the character gets a +5% on each Technical skill selection.

Secondary Skills: Select four from the standard available skill categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 3, 6, 9 and 12.

Special Bonus: +1 to P.P. and P.E.

Pay in the Old World: Middle income; slightly more for those who owned their own business.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. A Gunsmith's skill, the ability to repair/fix weaponry and reload shell casings, is at a premium.

## Socialite

Chances are the Socialite was just figuring out what to wear when the zombie wave hit. Nine times out of ten it was lucky for them that their penthouse suite was located above the thirtieth floor. With no cell phone reception and social media, suddenly, matching their favorite pair of heels with the wrong skinny jeans is the least of their worries.

Character Note: Don't roll your eyes too quickly; then again, go ahead if you must. G.M.s, while this may not be the most popular choice for your players, remember that character occupations are for NPC generation as well. A socialite character, played appropriately, might add some additional challenges or at the very least, some comic relief.

Occupational Skills: Athletics or Aerobic Athletics, Barter (+5%), Wardrobe & Grooming (+20%), Seduction or Dance (+10%), Computer Operation (+15%), Horsemanship or Sailing (+5%), Fencing or Swimming (+5%).

Elective Skills: Select eight total from the standard available skill categories.

Secondary Skills: Select two from the standard available skill categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 3, 6, 8 and 12.

Special Bonus: +1 to M.A. or P.B.

Pay in the Old World: Ridiculously good in the right social setting or circumstance. Pre-wave, most socialites spent more time spending their parents' money than actually making it themselves. That being said, there were a few that marketed themselves as a brand, becoming social media sensations and this popularity made them a small fortune.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services needed. Though low on survivalist skills, most socialites start with a good deal of trading capital, and often know the location of more, that is if they can convince others to help them get to it.

## Professional Poker Player/Gambler

Before the wave hit, gambling for a living was the ideal job. Independence and perseverance are two qualities most of these individuals possess. Some are outright thieves; others are free-spirited idealists.

Alignment Note: Character cannot select a good alignment; selfish (95%) or evil (5%) only!

Occupational Skills: Barter (+5%), Computer Operation (+5%), Cardsharp (+20%), Gambling: Standard (+25%), Gambling: Dirty Tricks (+10%), Palming (+10%), Streetwise (+5%), Mathematics: Advanced (+4%), Research (+5%).

Elective Skills: Select 4 total from the standard available skill categories plus Rogue, but the character gets a +3% bonus to Communication and Technical Skill selections.

Secondary Skills: Select three from the standard available categories at level one, +1 additional skill at levels 4, 8, and 12.

Special Bonus: +2 to M.E. or +1 to P.P.

Pay in the Old World: Typically good to average; only the top pros made anything resembling six figure salaries.

Pay in the New World: Barter for services rendered. May have other useful skills and most are good judges of character.

## Encounters: Hook, Line & Sinker™ Adventures

**Hook:** During the daylight hours the group is traveling through a once middle-class, rural or suburban neighborhood. A four-story, brick school building is situated on an adjacent block, which is positioned at the center (90 feet/27 m from the street) of a rolling, overgrown lawn. The entirety of the weed-riddled property is surrounded by 3 foot (0.9 m) high, chain link fence. When the group gets closer to the schoolhouse, one of the large front double doors slowly opens and a young girl steps outside, motioning at the characters; seeming to ask them to come over to the door. If they don't, she will run across the overgrown lawn towards them, unlatch the gate (which is unlocked, just latched) and hurry across the street to their position. Note: The G.M. could bring in a Sloucher (or two), hidden among the tall weeds, that rises behind the girl just as she reaches the fence.

**Line:** The young girl's name is Lorraine and she is 12 years old. It's been two days since her parents left her and her two younger brothers (Ben, 9 and Abner, 8) to scavenge for supplies. The kids have been staying in the school's basement waiting for their parents' return. The first floor of the schoolhouse is piled with (slain) decaying zombie corpses, but the basement level is clean and livable (though a little messy). The kids have some basic foodstuffs; canned soup as well as bottled water, etc. A thorough search of the building might yield some supplies and players should discover a pattern zombie grading papers in the math lab on the fourth floor; other than this, the school building is clear.

**Sinker:** As the players talk with Lorraine and her young siblings, they notice a large city map tacked to a wall, in which four

locations have been circled in red marker. A check mark has been drawn within two of the circles with the other two clear. Did the parents check the circles they had already scavenged from or did they mark them just before they left? Looking at the map, none of the locations are not farther than three or four blocks from the school. How will the player characters handle this situation? And what will they find; are the kids' parents dead or trapped in a building surrounded by a zombie horde?

**Hook:** In the middle of the street is a family-sized, oak dinner table blocking the roadway. Next to it, a large paper sign (recently made) with black, handwritten letters reads, "Please take only one."

**Line:** On top of the table is?

**Sinker 1:** A bunch of two-way radios: the radios are fully charged and come with earpieces. Each is set to the same frequency or channel, but who is on the other end; the Road Reapers, a Death Cult?

**Sinker 2:** A pile of notebooks, which are handwritten copies of, "The Reapers' Survival Guide." The books are weather-worn but serviceable and most importantly, legible.

**Sinker 3:** Potato sacks full of dismembered zombie body parts.

**Sinker 4:** Maps, which could cover anything from a state, city street map or perhaps a sewage tunnel map. The G.M. should know (with careful planning) ahead of time what the map means though this is for the characters to figure out. Some locations on the map could be circled or marked in different ways. Marked areas on the map could signify anything from safe houses to places bare of supplies; to highlighting buildings full of zombies, or places with an abundance of useful items. Those who left the maps could have good or bad intentions. Use your imaginations!

**Hook:** The player character group could be at any location; though near a road or street is preferable.

**Line:** Coming toward the group at about 15 mph (24 km) is a classic, box-framed ice-cream truck. However, instead of the chirpy classic ice cream song, the vehicle's speakers are producing the zombie moan at high decibel!

**Sinker:** Needless to say, hundreds of zombies are following the truck and the closer the truck gets; zombies are coming out of stasis all around the player characters. **Note:** Interesting game dynamic/question: do the zombies respond to a recorded and replayed moan or are they just reacting to the truck?

**Hook:** The player characters discover or decide to scavenge a Police H.Q. A few of the squad cars at the front of the building are burnt out and the exterior of the building is riddled with bullet holes. The front glass doors and windows from the front to the side of the building have been completely shattered.

**Line:** Inside, the scene is bloody. The havoc that must have ensued seems relatively fresh. Five zombie corpses lay slain within the main front office. At the end of the room, the last remaining deputy is slouched in a chair behind a desk with his back to the player characters, situated in front of a steel door marked with a sign above it that reads, "Jail." The grapefruit sized hole (and brain matter stuck to the ceiling) at the back of his head should leave the characters no doubt that the deputy is in fact dead. On closer inspection, the shotgun he used is at his feet. **Note:** The G.M. could introduce a remaining Crawler, hiding beneath the desk at the deputy's shoes.

The H.Q. should have some supplies (the shotgun, some shells, flashlights, etc. The door to the jail room at the back of the room is locked, but through a small, reinforced glass window, the characters (should they look) can see two men in one of the cells. One of the men is very large and muscular, the other, very small. If the characters are looking through the (6x6 inch) window, the smaller man will notice them, suddenly shouting, "Oh God, please-please, get me out of here!" A key to the jail door should be found on the deputy or within one of the desk drawers.

**Sinker:** The big man (a former police officer himself) has locked himself inside with a regular convict, and he is almost frightened beyond reproach. He has the only key to the cells and will stand at the back wall of the cell, refusing to help or talk (at least at first), should the player characters try to convince him to unlock the cell. Obviously the former deputy has "lost it," to some degree. The smaller man seems reasonable (as many criminals have been known to portray themselves) and begs the characters to help get him the hell out of there! The men have been in the cell without food or water for two days.

**Hook:** The characters are stationed on the top floor or closed roof area of a medium-sized high-rise (20-25 stories) and are preparing to hunker down for the night. The sky is clear and the moon is full, which is positioned just right to provide an excellent light source to the neighboring structures and the street in front of the building below.

**Line:** It is not long after the player group has settled in that a number of large explosions rock a nearby building, causing it to collapse entirely! The repercussions of this event causes the exterior windows (of the building the player characters are in) to crack and a few to shatter entirely, pictures hanging on the wall clatter to the floor, and the enormous dust cloud from the destroyed building rises to the skyline and throughout the streets below. The visibility from the windows is non-existent for about 30 minutes (taking three hours to clear well enough for the characters to see the street below) as the dust cloud filters through into the group's building, filling the air with debris and dust particles. Those with the Demolitions skill might recognize (skill check necessary) that the explosions were timed and that it was very likely the building was purposefully destroyed. **Note:** I've given the G.M. a couple sinkers to be used either together or separate.

**Sinker 1:** Zombie Pande-(moan)-monium! The collapse of the neighboring building has caused the zombies in the streets below, (as well as the ones resting dormant within the player characters' building) to come out of stasis; slouching, crawling (zombie moaning) their way up the stairwells. If there are other survivor occupants within the building the player characters will begin to hear gunshots and shouts on the floors below them, which are getting louder each moment they delay. There is no doubt the zombies are coming!

**Sinker 2:** "BEEP!-BEEP!" The characters hear a sharp chirp and discover an explosive demolition device in the very building they are staying! A second, third, and fourth chirp should clue the characters that the devices are armed and counting down. Whatever the reason (G.M.s be fair), the player characters should get the clue that they need to get the hell out of there.

**Hook:** While traveling through the wilderness, the party discovers a neighborhood of eight to ten large, modern wood cabins situated below the group's position on a rocky incline cut into

a steep valley. A thin smoke lightly funnels from a few of the chimneys filling the air with the pleasant scents of home cooking. The only access by vehicle is a narrow, winding road carved into the mountainside; the shoulder of which is only a few brave steps from a steep ravine. The entire terrain surrounding the property is covered in a thick forest of pine trees, and ferns.

**Line:** Six to eight families (18-30 people) have made these secluded cabins their home. The people here have found safe refuge for now, but are relatively unskilled in dealing with the harsh conditions of the zombie apocalypse. A few will have some basic survival skills (fishing/hunting), but most were city dwellers, with the cabins serving as vacation homes, which they wisely retreated to as all hell started to break loose. As long as the characters are reasonable, the families will welcome them with open arms. The people in these cabins have little idea about what is really going on.

**Sinker:** This secluded cabin villa is settled between a small town and a large city, each is about 30 miles (48 km) away in opposite directions. A freshwater stream abundantly flows about a half a mile from the community; though there is fresh water provided by a well that still works and provides fresh drinking water to the entire community. G.M.s can swing this H.L.S. a number of ways. Many of the people within the cabin community have a desire to venture back to one of the towns and search for loved ones and survivors. Supplies are going to need to be gathered. It seems the community is more than willing to hand over the reins of leadership to the player characters. Is the group up to the task?

**Hook:** The group is traveling away from a city (by vehicle) on an old country road or highway; or basically in a relatively secluded area. The surrounding landscape consists mostly of farmland and deciduous trees with the occasional dirt or gravel driveway leading off the main road to a farmhouse, barn, or grain tower. The road in which the group is traveling is raised slightly above the surrounding terrain, providing a good clear view of about one mile (1.6 km) in any direction.

**Line:** On the shoulder of the road, the group sees a man sitting in a lawn chair. The man is holding a large homemade sign that reads, "Please Stop." As the group's vehicle gets closer and if they slow down, the man slowly gets up and approaches, keeping his hands up, in a display that he means the group no harm. If the characters decide (they've seen this trick before) not to slow down the man will begin jumping up and down and wave his arms erratically, while shouting pleadingly for them to stop. He will continue his strange behavior until the characters can no longer see the man through their rearview mirror.

**Sinker 1:** The man is a road bandit who is either working entirely on his own or with a team. Whichever is the case and if given the opportunity, he will try to convince the player group that he is not alone or that his teammates are hidden and watching (the man's back); though the characters will be unable to see where these "others" are located.

**Option A:** If he is alone, the man will claim that the road the group is on is in fact a toll road and only those who make a "proper donation" should expect safe passage through the next few miles. The man will claim that those that do not pay the toll should expect a much shorter and unpleasant journey, as the man's fellow bandits are waiting for them with a slew of nasty surprises. The man will say, "Just pay the toll my friends, we don't want to hurt you. But we control this road and with the world gone to hell,

safe passage has its cost." What exactly the man expects to con or attempt to con out of the player group is up to the G.M. as well as what penalties (the man will claim) should await the group if they don't pay the toll. The man will have a bike and basic camping equipment stowed out of line of sight very nearby. Since he is working by himself, he is not that greedy.

**Option B:** If the man is not alone, he will explain to the group that he is part of this small farming community, not very far from a dirt drive the group has recently passed and that it would be dangerous for the group to proceed any further. The man will supply the group with any number of lies as to why the group should not proceed; from a dangerous group of bandits ahead to zombie horde, to an impassable or flooded roadway. If the group is not so easily fooled, then to gain their confidence the man will pull a folding map from his pocket, point to their current location on the map and explain that such and such danger lies ahead and say, "Well, my friends, be careful" and "I hope to see you back this way soon," as the group drives on. He will do nothing to stop them from going. He might also point to the fact of the lack of zombies in the area to "prove" of his community's control of the area.

The man's goal is to get the group to drive down to one of the barns or country houses where an armed posse will ambush the group. Though the bandits (10-30) will welcome a group who seems well armed and ready initially and so gain their trust while patiently waiting (perhaps as long as 2 or 3 days) until the player group is the most vulnerable or least likely to put up armed resistance. Though ruthless, the bandits are not cold-blooded murderers, usually allowing the group to keep some foodstuffs and two or three of their modern weapons before sending them on their way.

**Sinker 2:** The man is genuinely trying to warn the group of something on the road ahead. Perhaps the next town (10 miles/16 km) is run by a Death Cult or an unscrupulous group of highway bandits/robbers. Maybe it's as simple as a zombie horde over the next couple of hills, or a structurally compromised bridge or flooded road ahead. The people the man was traveling with have all perished because of what is ahead. The character group will realize that the man is a little more than mentally disturbed, and is suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder from his recent tragedy. Might be a good spot for G.M.s to introduce a contributing N.P.C. if the player characters should (which good ones will) help the man.

**Hook:** The characters find a personal audio recording device and hit the play button.

**Line:** "To whoever is listening to this, my name is Gerald Lockhart. It's been too many days since all hell broke loose, I hardly recall the month – let alone the day. And if you're listening to this you know what I mean and it also means I'm dead; perhaps you're the one that ended my misery after the change, perhaps and hopefully so, I died instead of turning into one of them. No matter, my family is gone as well. I pray to god I have joined them and please listen close. Because I'm going to help you survive. You must get to—"

**Sinker:** Gerald gives an address and gives a brief explanation that he had spent the last eight years prepping for doomsday. He claims to have built a fallout shelter that is well stocked with weapons, supplies, clean water and food.



# A Day in the Life of Scott Benter, G.A.

## A Heroes Unlimited™ Short Story

By Glen A. Evans

The alarm in my smartphone makes the most irritating noise in the world. Once it goes off, the sound claws at your eardrum, making it nearly impossible to ignore. You're literally forced out of blissful sleep to fetch the damn thing to turn it off. Part of your brain is tempted to toss it in the nearest corner, but a quick reminder that the device cost two grand and a replacement comes out of your wallet is more than enough to give you pause. Still though, it's my third phone this year.

As I fumble for the device, my awakened conscious becomes aware that the noise is not my alarm but the ring tone indicating an incoming call. I glance at the LCD screen that looks like a wristwatch on my left hand. It reads 7:31 a.m. EST. I've only been asleep for three hours. So typical, the cruel force that controls this world must have it in for me, otherwise it would grant me a moment where I can at least obtain the average number of hours normal people get to shut off their mind and enjoy some much needed REM time. Nope, such needs are not in the cards for Scott Benter; not yesterday, tomorrow and certainly not today.

I snatch the phone up and try to speak in a voice that suggests I'm wide awake.

"Hello."

"Hey Scott," says the voice on the other end. I recognize it at once through the foggy haze still swirling around in my head. Agent Oliver Quinn, my former partner in training. Two weeks ago they took away his bronze star and gave him a silver shield, making him a full field agent. I can only hope and pray the world can stave off the forces of Armageddon now that this genius is hitting the streets on his own.

"Is there a logical reason for you to be calling me? I've just pulled an all-nighter with nothing to show for it except droopy eyes and a digestive system overloaded on nachos and Coke."

"Judge Baldoney signed the warrant for Tyrone Gilmore and Central has it marked as a priority one response."

"Is there a unit on standby?"

"A four person snatch and grab."

That meant I held authority over two light weapons specialists, a heavy, and a technical officer of S.C.R.E.T. awaiting my word and/or arrival to engage the target and either contain or eliminate him. If they're anything like the last bunch assigned to me, I'd rather have a high school Phys. Ed. class. At least I know half of

them would do what I tell them to do and not go off half-cocked on their own.

“How fresh is the warrant?” I ask.

“The judge signed it two and half hours ago.”

That meant the four man S.C.R.E.T team has been trigger happy for at least an hour or more. If I didn't get myself moving they'd start without me, assuming that my non-compliance was the go ahead to start shooting.

“Tell the boys that I'm putting on my boots. Keep their guns on safe and their brains on standby. They are not to engage until I give the signal or he starts putting up a fight.”

“No problem.”

“And when I mean on standby, I mean standby and don't do a damn thing until I'm on scene and have a chance to negotiate with the kid. So that means they are to stay a hundred yards away from the target's location.”

“You sure about that?”

“It's my call, Oliver. This kid's looking to join a college football team. He's not planning an assault on innocent civilians.”

“Might change his mind if you start talking to him.”

“I've done a hundred hours of field work on this kid. He's only interested in playing football so he can get his family out of the financial hole that they're in. I doubt he really understands what he's capable of or even if he knows what he's doing besides becoming a potential commodity for the NCAA.”

“Well you're the lead investigator so I'll leave such decision making in your capable hands.”

“Are you on site?”

“I'm looking at his hotel window right now.”

“I need two hours to get ready.”

There was a short pause in his voice. “You were being serious about pulling an all-nighter?”

“You know me Oliver. I don't joke about the job, especially when it involves someone like Meta Bomb.”

“Scott, you're talking about at least 48 hours of non-stop surveillance.”

“And your point is?”

“You do realize this city has three dozen field agents as equally capable as you are at handing a high priority like Meta Bomb.”

And I can count on one hand how many of them I trust to do the job right. But I have no way of knowing if Oliver is standing on the corner by himself or not. I've ruffled enough feathers to make three or four pillowcases. So I answer with the best placatory grin that I know how to make, “Yes.”

“Just because you got some extrasensory gifts in your head doesn't make you any better than anyone else in this agency.”

“Not at all, Oliver. We're all good at doing our job.”

“Only you think you're so much better and the rest of us are a bunch of amateurs?”

“I do not.”

“Then why the maverick attitude then? It's either your way or you're not involved. And because you're always holding out, anyone else tries stepping in your place is left with misinformation or half truths, and that's the kind of irresponsibility that gets good agents killed.”

S.C.R.E.T agents he means. We G.I.G.M.A. operatives are smart enough to stay the hell out of the way and let them get all the glory or the body bag attire.

“Scott, I happen to know as of this day you've got 960 hours of vacation owed to you.”

“Maybe.”

“So are you telling me that you're that dedicated to the job or are you that unwilling to allow others to handle investigations that we're more than capable of handling on our own?”

“Tough call. I'd have to sleep on it and give you an answer in the morning. See you in two.”

I hang up on him before he can utter another piece of factual information for my ego to deny. Yeah, I consider myself set above the average federal agent and not just because I'm a latent psychic with three years in the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia, five years with the Secret Service (most with the Presidential Protection Division), and seven years as an agent for the Government Investigation of Genetic Mutation and Abnormalities. However, each year as an agent of G.I.G.M.A. is like going by dog years, meaning I've got 44 years of hell and high water I've gone through to get where I am today. In short, I'm alive and each perp I've met is either dead, incarcerated, or sworn to act as normal as possible in today's society. The way I see it, the more involved I am the better I'll feel about the outcome. DTA, Max used to say. Don't Trust Anybody to do what's right.

It takes me a mere five minutes to empty my bladder, jump in and out of the shower (namely to wash the stink out of the nose sensitive areas of the human anatomy), shave without cutting my face to ribbons, and take my psychic re-inhibitor. Fortunately for me, I wasn't born a telepath. That really sucks for people, especially when you're trying to sleep and voices coming from other people's heads start popping in and out of your head. Lucky for me, I'm an empath, so all I get is their emotional baggage, but when choosing my condo, I made sure to secretly purchase the room across from mine and to get a corner spot. It reduces the background sensations I pick up when I'm trying to relax or sleep. Nothing worse when you're dead on your feet, trying to get forty winks, and the couple in the room next door are engaged in horizontal refreshment. The tsunami of emotional ecstasy is more than I can tolerate. So I suppress my natural abilities just enough to shut out the clatter but not so much that if any of the hundreds of enemies I made over the years decides to take me out, I'll still receive my precognitive warning of impending doom.

Once the essentials are taken care of, time to start on the semi-essentials. Breakfast today will be a bowl of bland tasting cereal that's the equivalent of eating a head of lettuce, a cinnamon breakfast biscuit, and a tall glass of OJ. I pick out one of a dozen dark business suits, with a white, starched shirt and dark slacks. Yeah, I'm old school. Given most G.I.G.M.A. field agents disguise themselves as someone other than what they truly are, I stick out like a backward thumb. I fit in nicely with the home agents working out of the offices, but I always get frowned upon by the other fields. Speaking of which, it's time I pick up one vital piece of my attire. I got a text yesterday morning from Gunter that my trench coat was ready. Didn't have the time to go yesterday and after not having it for days I'm starting to feel naked and vulnerable.

I make it a habit to buy a new tie once a month, so hanging in my closet is a hundred or more ties. Traditionalist I might be when it comes to attire, but I go all out when it comes to ties. Max once told me you can tell a lot about a man from the ties he wears. Today I'm wearing a blue tie covered with blue panda faces. So according to his theory, what's that say about me?

I go over to my nightstand and remove the light bulb. I stick my finger in the socket, causing a bio-metric scanner to activate. The light bulb itself doesn't need the socket to work. It's all a part of an elaborate ruse just in case someone does figure out where I live and what I do for a living. The scanner confirms that I am who my DNA indicates and opens a trap door in the floor. It's the only way the door opens and a couple of times when I've been in a hurry I've accidentally knocked the lamp over, which required me to walk into the home office unarmed, with a humbled look on my face as I beg and plead for a tech guy to come back with me and unlock my floor safe.

In the floor vault I retrieve gear that I never leave home without, a point-blank vest and my Model No. 1. It's basically an M1911 handgun with external dimensions the same as a standard 1911, however mine fires a .50 GI armor-piercing round. The bullets are not in the magnum class and work at the same pressures as the .45 ACP, but the impact is strong enough to be the near equal of other 50 caliber rounds but without all the recoil and kinetic energy issues. In other words, I kill whatever I shoot at and hiding behind a cement wall or 1/2 inch thick armor plate steel won't do you a bit of good.

I load up on some extra clips and put the gun in its side holster. Then I stare down at the wooden box. This is the part where I ask myself, am I the monster that I'm not trying to be? Those who know of our existence, fear us like the Devil himself and for good reason, because S.C.R.E.T. can bring hell on Earth if they so choose. But G.I.G.M.A. agents are not allowed to carry such firepower. We're investigators and arresting officers, not the judge, jury, and executioner like our sister agency. But we also like living more than a week, and in our line of work, you can't risk being unprepared or insignificant.

I hold Gunter's Atomic Separator Pistol in my left hand and try once again to make sense of why I accepted it in the first place. Yeah, that incident with Ultimate Smasher scared the hell out of me. I emptied the clip of my gun in that plug tail's face and it barely fazed him. S.C.R.E.T. showed up at the last second with enough stone foam to entrap a semi-truck. They rolled his hulking form like a giant popcorn ball into the back of dump truck and off he went to wherever they take psycho freak jobs like him. But that was the closest I came to nearly dying, even closer than losing my left hand a year and half ago to that nut Zoomerang. Gunter gave me the GASP and the coat as an insurance policy, claiming it was an investment into my safety. The longer I stay alive, the less likely Project Tyche will find him.

I weigh the options again, turning over in my head how many times the gun has saved my life and others, then I recall what happened when I fired a continuous beam at Venom Lad nearly a year ago. My memory is such that I never forget a single word I read, sound that I hear, or an event that I witness. The words and sounds that came out of that man and the gruesome image of what came next sickens me to my very soul. I live with that vivid memory of what I did every single day. Given a different circumstance, knowing what I know now, I'm not sure if I have the will to pull the trigger. Then again, the only life he threatened that day was mine alone. One day, I suppose I'll have to decide again. I quickly end the internal debate with myself and put the GASP in the other holster.

Five minutes later I've turned on the security system and I'm out the door. Down the elevator I go until I arrive in the garage. There my beloved flying fishbowl sits all by his lonesome, a yel-

low, 1979 AMC Pacer D/L. When I drive Dwayne (yes, that's his name) on the street, I get the strangest looks from people. Most wonder if they've gone back in time or if a showing of classic cars is in town. I got Dwayne as a graduation present from Max and I've kept him ever since. Of course, I had the tech guys at the lab do some tinkering with him to install the latest high tech modifications that we're allowed to have. So he's really not a Pacer under the hood, but body and frame, he's as original and classic as possible.

With a wave of my cyber hand, the door opens. Another signal from my security clearance access chip starts the car. Ah, the wonders of cybernetic technology, making life so much easier for people who can afford it. Dwayne's turbo engine with my own unique sound suppressor starts up with flawless precision. I back out of my lavishly expensive parking space and hit the open road.

I was born and raised in Ultropolis, and except for my brief time with the Secret Service in Washington D.C., I've spent most of my life here. With over 2.6 million residents, Ultropolis at times feels like the capital of the world. Then someone comes along with this odd statistic about 49% of the population being born outside this city. Over half the people in Ultropolis ended up here. Which makes us sound like America's dumping ground. Maybe we should have the Statue of Liberty standing outside the city limits.

Twenty minutes later I arrive at Optimotor. If the Pacer wasn't already loaded with hundreds of thousands of dollars of advanced technology I'd hand it over to these guys. They won't steer you wrong and they'll always work out the best deal to get your wheels back on the road. I guess if you have to find fault with them it's they're too honest to be good businessmen. Right now though, I've no need for Elliot and Gerald Downs, just their silent partner, my pal Gunther.

Gunther's not of this world, and I mean that sincerely. He's an alien from a planet called Uciza Primei found in what Earth scientists call the Pinwheel Galaxy, a distant 21 million light-years away. Surprisingly enough, he can easily pass for human, only he's missing a belly button. Gunther's people stopped doing natural childbirth over a thousand years ago. They decided cloning was the preferred method for reproduction. Gunther's people are technological geniuses far beyond what Earthlings can hope to imagine. He makes our best and brightest look like cave people. How he came to Earth is a sore subject, something about testing a new means of traveling in something called infraspace. Every time he tries explaining it to me I get a headache. The point is his test ship crash-landed in the Canadian wilderness. Project Tyche, the name of the U.S. Air Force UFO investigation operation, in a joint operation with Canadian S.C.R.E.T., located his ship and sent it to some unknown location. Gunther tried his best to find it and nearly got himself captured. Because of his expertise in the use of meta-technology, Tyche called G.I.G.M.A. in to help with his apprehension. That's where I came in. Call me a softy but I didn't think it was right that this guy who was just trying to get back to his home world needed to be chased down by our anti-alien hysterics. Sure, things went bad for the Century Station folks but that's no reason to go all paranoid and deny a visitor to our world basic rights given to everyone visiting this country. So I decided to go against my better judgment and help the guy. I got him a job at Optimotor which he took to right away. Of course, fixing automobile engines that run on fossil fuels to him is like an aeronautics engineer working on a paper airplane. Prob-

lems started appearing six months later when “alien tech” started showing up in dozens of vehicles. Gunter nearly found himself under foot of Alpha Prime of the Centurions. Luckily, I managed to persuade her to look elsewhere. I lied to a woman more than capable of tearing me limb from limb or vaporizing my head with a single energy blast finger poke. I convinced Gunther to stop upgrading vehicles, and as a reward he gave me the trench coat and the GASP. How he managed to do so, I’ve no idea. Today he’s my regular handyman, always fixing anything I need repaired, and since he was the only person I knew who was capable of fixing my coat, I went to him four days ago.

I walk into the back room as if I own the place, which considering how much I’ve invested into this place, I’ve every right to. I open the closet door and find the breaker box for the store. I hit a switch and just like my condominium, a trap door opens up, only this one includes a ladder. I descend ten feet into a concealed sub-basement under the building. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out who Gunther paid to have it installed. I know their work all too well. Damon Lazaris and I have an understanding; he doesn’t get in my way and I won’t bring him and his criminal organization that services the underworld into the public spotlight. I’m after bad guy super beings not a bunch of normal folks who build them secret bases. Of course, that doesn’t stop Damon from telling his clients about me. Several over the last seven years have tried to take me out. Five are doing hard time, the rest I put bullets in their heads.

Unlike other maintenance specialists, Gunther is a neat freak. I don’t mean the place is germ free, he’s not that obsessive, but the place is clean enough to perform open heart surgery in. I find him sitting at his desk scrutinizing over what looks to be a circuit board. He’s a small man. Prissy. Arched expression. Clothes, gig line perfect and neat.

“About time, I’m going to start charging you extra like they do at the cleaner’s.”

I finger tap the table. “I was busy.”

“Sure, too busy to pick up the one thing that’s guaranteed to save your life.”

“Doesn’t help me cut down red tape paperwork,” I replied.

He gestures toward a locker with a large photograph of super-model Grace Bardican on the front. I took that picture for him as payment for the last business arrangement we made. “I want another one,” he says.

“Well considering what I had to go through to take that picture, I’ll consider it worth three favors. She’s beefed up her security ever since Motherboard kidnapped her in Century Station last year. Why not just search the Internet for one?”

“Because I don’t want a doctored up one. I want the real deal. She’s the closest thing to perfection.”

“Be sure to wipe that chin of yours after you’re done drooling.”

“Oh I’ll do more than that if you...”

I hold my hands up. I really don’t want to hear the details. “Where’s my coat?”

“Hanging up in there.”

“Did you at least put it in there before you started enjoying the photograph?”

“Of course. You know Scott, you ought to use the personal force field more often. It saves the coat from getting those nasty bullet holes in it you’re so found of acquiring.”

“You know, I’ve never thought about doing that before. Thanks for enlightening me on that piece of information. I only wish it possessed a little bit more energy to keep off the blast wave that Meta Bomb released four days ago that nearly blew me to kingdom come.”

“Sorry, can’t be helped. The force energy is generated based on a conversion of the bio-energy radiated by its owner. You’re just not physically fit enough. Try exercising.”

I flash him a dirty look before opening the locker. Ah, there she is in all her yellow glory. I’ve always had a fondness for Dick Tracy and when Gunter told me he could make me a protective, high-tech trench coat, I told him make it bright sunshine yellow. A month later, my pride and joy was hand delivered to me. The moment I slip it on it feels like I’m wearing my own skin. I slip my smart phone out of my pants pocket and into a special inside pocket in the trench. There is a small cable where I connect it. Now the phone and the coat are one. I also attach another small cable from the cuff to the wristband receiver on my left hand. Now my bio-system sensor hand, the coat, and my phone are a single unit, enabling me to access technological capabilities that surpass everything my fellow agents could dream of.

“Feel better?” he asks.

“Oh yeah.”

“What about the GASP?”

I don’t want to talk about it. I nod toward the circuit board. “So-what’s that about?”

He tossed it across the table, “It’s broke but not beyond repair. I asked you about the GASP. You know that piece of strange matter that powers that gun I could have sold at a minimum of three hundred million credits.”

“Down the street, I doubt it. They prefer paper money.”

He snorts. “I didn’t mean down the street.” He points skyward.

“One of the guys upstairs?”

Now I was just teeing him off.

“That piece of hardware is my greatest invention. You wanted something to even the odds. Well there you have it.”

“I wanted a gun, not a kill everything and anything cannon.”

“Considering the type of work that you do and the beings you’re encountering, you’re lucky the only thing you’ve lost so far is your left hand.”

He makes a good point, and as if to hammer the position home, my left hand starts to itch. It’s been a year and a half since Zoomerang’s bladed boomerang took my real hand from me. The cyber-doc told me I’d feel a little phantom pain every now and then; not enough to require me taking medication but enough to remind me that no matter how realistic the bio-hand tries to be, it’s still not the one I was born with.

“Egor Larsh is a clown I underestimated based on his personality not his abilities.”

“Thus the reason you’re debating the issue of owning the gun. You feel guilty for having to possess such a powerful weapon. In your hands is the capability to decide life or death.”

“Yeah and the longer I fire it the more I put my own life in jeopardy.”

“I did warn you of that risk, but I’m certain in the heat of the moment, your life is the furthest thing from your mind.”

I hate it when he’s right.

“Thanks for the repair.”

“Anytime, just try and stay out of the line of fire for a while. I’ll need about \$10,000 for another Transmetric Clamp and even then they’re hard to come by.”

“I’ll do better.”

“And remember, don’t be afraid of the gun, be more afraid of whomever your pointing that thing at.”

I gave him a one finger salute and left.

Back outside, my subconscious starts milling over everything he said. This is when having total recall is a pain in the butt. How am I supposed to block out the validity of what he said so I can go about my business? There are days having psychic talents really stinks, especially when they work against you from winning an argument.

Ten minutes later I’m on Washington swerving in and out of traffic. Half of the time, I think people in my way are staring at the car wondering how in the world I’ve got it running. The other half is a bunch of frigging idiots too dumb to put down their phones. With mine patched into my coat, I can safely talk to anyone on the planet or orbiting overhead while keeping both eyes firmly on the road. Though I must admit even I have been known on a few occasions to have wandering eye syndrome but that’s usually because something feminine crossed my path.

I arrive at Washington and W. 113<sup>th</sup> Street. Just my luck, I find a vacant parking spot across from an art supply store and squeeze into it. Tyrone Gilmore’s hotel is a block and a half away. Oliver said he was in eyeshot and this is a perfect spot to keep peeps on him but well enough away to blend in without drawing suspicion, at least to my way of thinking and considering I did all that I could to train Oliver, reason dictates he should be standing somewhere on the corner.

I get out of the car and consider my options. Since he called my phone with his, I could use my coat to pinpoint his exact location with near perfect accuracy. I’ve also seen his aura, which, like a human fingerprint, is distinct and unique to each individual, and with me never forgetting anything I’ve seen, I could pick him out of a cast of thousands. Then again, I could use my years of experience as a law enforcement officer and federal agent trained to spot an undercover operative like a stop sign in the middle of the desert just too still see if I have the knack for it and to see how well I’ve trained my most recent protégé. That’s the choice I make so I let my eyes perform a detailed image scan. The intersection is full of pedestrians. I study their faces but do so while keeping my head down. My eyes move from person to person. I spot young lovers holding hands or with their arms around each other. I see groups of friends-little gangs of fun-seekers. I spot individuals attempting to disconnect from the world around by plugging themselves into a device in their pocket or they’re trying to walk and text at the same time.

I stop near the curb and risk raising my head. Despite the yellow coat, few people pay any attention to me. There are no judgmental gazes. People keep their distance and only directly react to me if I invade their space. It’s another ability the coat grants me; the ability not to be noticed unless I want to be.

Then I spot him. He was wearing some ragged clothes and a tattered raincoat. He must have dipped his hand in a mud puddle and rubbed the slime into his scalp and onto his neck and face. Not bad, I admitted to myself. He looks the part but I notice he’s not acting the part. It’s the most important skill they taught us at the academy; assume what you appear to be. Kid’s still got a lot to learn, unfortunately it’s not my job anymore to hold his hand

and guide him through the ranks. I’ve done all that I can for the kid, it’s up to him to live and learn.

I make my way over to him and he reacts to my approach. We end up meeting half way.

“Your disguise stinks. You’re not fooling anybody.”

“It’s not meant to do anything but allow me to keep tabs on your boy upstairs,” he replies with a little gruff in his voice.

“Still, if you’re going to do anything in this business go the extra mile and do it right.”

“I’ll remember that next time when the shoe’s on the other foot.”

“He still up there?” I ask.

“Just ordered breakfast. We just sent a bogus phone message to the kid’s agent. Joesph already intercepted the guy so we don’t have to worry about any interference from him.”

“Nicely done.”

“Hey, I learned from the second best.”

“Yeah, right,” I reply. “Where’s trouble?”

He points to the roof of the five-story building nearly a block away. “Wave and smile for the camera.”

“They understand this is my parade and nobody does squat unless I give the okay?”

“Your party, you call the shots.”

I point my finger into Oliver’s face. “I want that made perfectly clear. Nobody does a thing unless I say so.”

“Kid might react faster than you’re able to anticipate and twist your head off.”

“I doubt it.”

“And what makes you so sure?”

“Because this kid’s primary motivation is to attend college so he can have a shot at the NFL. He did an interview with his school newspaper a few weeks ago, wants to be a member of the Motor City Madmen.”

“Sure that’s all he wants to be?”

“The kid’s whole life has been all about football. He thinks if he can succeed in football it will help his mother out.”

“Sounds like the typical start of every other super villain.”

I want to slap him upside the head. “When did you turn into a cynic?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps around the time we investigated that coal miner who was working all those extra hours trying to take care of his wife with cancer and their three kids. He gets trapped in a cave in with three other guys and gets exposed to some radioactive meteorite that “just happened” to be down there. For whatever reason the four miners all acquire super abilities and what is the first thing they do: attack the coal mining company they work for and kill dozens of people. Then they go knock over a couple of banks and jewelry stores. Eventually we track them down and S.C.R.E.T. finishes them off. Now you’d think maybe just maybe this coal miner might have sent some of that stolen money to help his ailing wife and his three kids. Nope. All he cared about the moment he acquired super abilities was how much wanton destruction he could cause.”

Oliver was right. Luther Gardner and the other members of Power Platoon was the last case we worked together on. He and I spent several hours interviewing Luther’s wife. She was lying in bed with Stage IV liver cancer while her sixteen year old daughter slaved away at Burger Haven trying to make ends meet, to help her mom and her two brothers, twelve and eight. The moment Luther and his co-workers attacked the company all his health ben-



efits paying for Susan's treatment became null and void. Power does strange things to people, affects the mind in ways you can't imagine. Look at me, I'm walking around with a weapon capable of killing anyone I meet, even the most powerful beings on the planet, yet the idea of using it on anyone causes me to cringe with fear. Other people like Luther Gardner lose themselves to it and forget all about the important things in life.

"Look, Gilmore isn't the norm. He's a good kid and probably has no idea what he is. He's got everyone pulling for him. His high school coach might have suspected but he didn't care after three Texas High School Division 1A football championships."

"Which is easy to say now, but what about next week when something else in his life doesn't work out the way he wanted it? These people don't need an excuse to take advantage of others."

"We can debate this until we're both blue in the face but it isn't going to change the situation. I'm the lead and my decision is final."

Oliver produces a manila envelope from beneath his coat and hands it over to me.

"Just don't let me catch you sitting at the bar drinking yourself silly because the kid takes his frustration out on everyone within a city block radius."

I tap the envelope against my leg. Part of me wants to persuade Oliver to see things my way, but the job has more than likely poisoned his compassion center. Doesn't matter what kind of bad childhood, unavoidable circumstances, or twisted fate happens to a person, Oliver was now one of those who no longer gave a damn. I know the type all too well. S.C.R.E.T. is chock full and G.I.G.M.A. is halfway there. You could say feeling that way is unavoidable. There's too much talk that we are at war with these people. So we turn them into "its" so that they're dehumanized. Makes it all the easier to react to them as things instead of humans with a valid claim on the same rights possessed by us normal folks. True enough, many supers out there are evil bastards and deserve to be shot in the face, more than once, at times. But it's also been my pleasure to meet a lot of good people and heroes trying to do good things for this world. I'm convinced the kid's one of those types. Only trouble is I have to rip out his dreams and stomp them under my feet. He either quits playing football or he'll be arrested and sent away to a place few ever return from, and those that do become carbon copies of people like Oliver.

Oliver raised his hand and gives a thumb up, the signal for the transfer of authority. Now I'm in charge and the S.C.R.E.T. agents on site are mine to command. All eyes are on me. The fate of a kid's destiny lay in the palm of my hand or at the end of the barrel of my gun.

I stuffed the envelope in a large coat pocket. I thought about fishing through it again but I already committed everything to memory. Why be redundant? Time to get this over with.

Tyrone was staying on the fifth floor of a seven story hotel. Our intelligence reports that Ultopolis University football coach Rod Byers and his scouts were the ones footing the bill and were giving the kid all the comforts he could ever want, well at least within legal reason. Hopefully, when this is over, they'll figure out why Tyrone just disappeared off the football radar map. They know the rules, but that being said, I can only scratch my head in wonderment why no one figured it out before. Why did it take for this kid to reach his senior year and get a college endorsement for someone to figure out that he wasn't normal and undeserving of any accolades?

As I approach the rotating doors I pause long enough to catch sight of my reflection in the hotel window. I straighten my collar and brush my blond hair with one hand; first impressions and all that. Don't want to wreck a man's life without looking my best.

The coat does its job and lets me walk through without making an impression. I enter the elevator with a family with way too much money to be regular tourists. They ignore me completely, too busy giggling about the service at the local restaurant. I've eaten here on numerous occasions. The quality is nothing to laugh at unless you're not fond of eating food that doesn't require a week's salary.

They get off on the fourth floor and I ride the rest of the way up alone.

I get out on the fifth and make my way toward room 517. I stop outside his door. Using my cyber hand, coat, and phone as a single unit, I send a secure text message to Oliver and the S.C.R.E.T technical officer indicating my position, although I'm positive they got me on their instruments as well. Standard practice in a situation like this is to remove all friendly fire possibilities out of harm's way so if Oliver followed protocol, he evicted the other guests and hotel staff off this floor in a covert manner in order not to rouse Tyrone's suspicions.

Sitting outside the door is a tray full of the kid's leftover breakfast. Though I suspect I'm the only one on this floor I glance about cautiously before kneeling over it. Last thing I want is some hotel maid coming out of a room thinking I'm some strange guy eating other people's leftovers.

This is the part about being psychic that I love. Many of us possess the talent to make relevant associations by making physical contact with a solid object. According to the experts who study this stuff, what we're really doing is tapping into an energy field that transfers knowledge regarding that object's history, its use, and last owner. Many in the world are well aware of this talent and allow us its full use and potential. Unfortunately, the U.S. legal system and most of the major nations have decided such powers violate the rights of due process. Any evidence discovered, no matter how incriminating, is inadmissible in a court of law. All evidence gathered from psychic abilities as well as all super powers, is also highly prejudicial. And not too long ago, the U.S. Supreme Court decided everyone has a Constitutional right to privacy against mental intrusion into their thoughts and memories, period. The FBI cannot ask me to read the thoughts of any criminal, no matter what he's charged with, in order to get a confession out of him. However, if you know your way around most of these hindering laws, you can still get the job done, in a sneaky sort of fashion, which just happens to be G.I.G.M.A.'s specialty.

First of all, it only works on an object of possession, meaning it has to have principle value or serve some important function. It doesn't work on any item you just put your hands on, otherwise you'd go crazy as everything you'd ever touch in a person's house would flood your head full of images and impressions. Second, those who are aware of this psychic talent go out of their paranoid way to protect themselves from it. Meaning they eat off paper plates and plastic silverware, they incinerate everything they throw out, they borrow things belonging to someone else, etc.

But here's the truth of the matter. If you believe the energy field theory then anything you touch and place value on becomes infused with that energy, even the simplest things, like for instance, a doorknob. Without that knob, you can't cross the

threshold into your home. Its purpose is to provide sanctuary and prevent intruders from entering. It's a separation of two different worlds imposed by the owner. In this case, I can't use it since the room is not his and the entrance is nothing but an electronic card key and a handle. Nor can I use the tray or the silverware, but I sure can use his leftovers. The bare chicken bone proves he considered it tasty enough to finish, so he assigned value to it. Therefore, he owns it. Unfortunately, the value of objects such as food is temporary. After a few hours you could care less about the food you've already eaten unless it's given you indigestion or something along those lines. But considering the high priced meal and the tasty quality, I'm betting there still a trace of energy left on that bone.

I make my move and grasp the bone. Sure enough, my head immediately becomes filled with images and impressions of Tyrone. For starters, I know he's in the room and he's alone. He's feeling a little anxious yet very excited, looking forward to events that have yet to transpire. I get a fuzzy picture of his appearance. He doesn't appear to be armed. He's also dressed as if he planned ongoing sightseeing, which means he might be waiting for his agent to return.

Now that I've got some kind of clue as what to expect, I feel a little easier about my convictions of this kid's general attitude. If it should suddenly change while I'm talking to him and he turns hostile toward me, I'll know a minute before he does anything. That could be bad for him, I don't like surprises.

I rattle my knuckles on the door and allow my empathic abilities to flow beyond. I don't need to see the kid, although it tends to work a little better when I do, but he doesn't register any feeling of dread or alarm. On the contrary, he has no idea of the ill will I intend for him.

The door opens slightly, allowing me a glancing peak inside. Very trusting kid. He didn't even ask who it was with the door still shut.

"Hello."

"Tyrone Gilmore."

"Yeah, what'cha want with me?"

I hold my I.D. up for him to see. "Scott Benter, federal agent. Can you open the door so I can have a word with you?"

"What's this about?"

"A private matter involving you, son."

"Did I do something wrong?"

I don't need my empathy to inform me that he's growing anxious. His voice grows shrill with each word he speaks.

"I just need a one on one private conversation with you."

He shuts the door and removes the lock. He's nervous but I sense nothing else out of the ordinary. He opens the door and I stroll inside casually, allowing my coat to open just enough for him to see that I am armed.

"My agent, Floyd, should be back any minute."

"No, he won't. We have him detained so we can talk without interruption." Using my cyber hand to access my phone and coat, I send a signal to Oliver that I've engaged the target. I also activate my phone's audio recorder function so our conversation can be recorded as proof of contact. Not essential in most contact cases but I like dotting my "I's" and crossing my "T's."

"Do I need to call my mom or get a lawyer?"

"Won't help you any."

"So what's this all about? What did I do wrong?"

"You played football, son."

"Hunh?"

"This year, son, you passed for 4,700 yards. Now if you were in the NFL, that would be impressive as a single season leader, but you're a senior in high school. You've also managed to accumulate 1,709 rushing yards in the last three years which is unheard of. I've also seen you throw a football 83 yards and hit the receiver in the chest. Now mind you that was a spectacular catch he made on his part, but the fact you threw it using your off hand while running backwards with a pass rusher in your face is downright unexplainable. Lastly, in the championship game, you had the option of doing a quarterback sneak but instead you hurtled over everybody, a horizontal jump of twelve yards at a peak height of nine feet. There's no doubt about it son, you're a mutant."

Kid looks at me as if I just called him the N-word.

"You're wrong about that. I ain't no M-freak."

"You don't have to have unusual physical characteristics to be considered a mutant, son. In fact, a third of all mutants lack any."

"Who in the hell do you think you are getting in my face and calling me a damn M-freak?"

"Statistics don't lie and I'm a federal agent employed by G.I.G.M.A. Do you recognize that name, son?"

"Uh, yeah. You're those guys who go after M-freaks wearing all that armor and stuff."

"That's our sister agency, S.C.R.E.T. They do all the heavy work, we're more subtle. We try to have a conversation like you and I are doing right now. Sometimes it works out, other times, not so well."

"You need more proof that what someone could just write down on any old piece of paper."

"How about surreptitious break-ins, intercepting digital media, video and audio surveillance, planting listening devices, inspecting garbage, safecracking, using informants, exploiting friendships, or posing as a friend, employer, or neighbor? And that was just a month's worth of observations."

The kid's breath catches in his throat. I don't need psychic abilities to know his heart is leaping in his chest right about now.

"We're experts at what we do, son. You're not the first and you won't be the last. You've been under observation since the beginning of the school year. Should have caught up to you sooner but you were never flagged as a high priority, that is until you decided to use your talents to attend an influential university such as Double U. Eleven college players have gone on and played in the pros. Two are in the Hall of Fame. Now why Coach Byers and his assistants haven't figured out what you are I find downright insulting. His scouts have extensive professional and college playing and coaching backgrounds, that alone should have told them you are a shark fin breaking the water. Normal eighteen year old high school quarterbacks don't throw 83 yard touchdowns or rush for 294 yards in a single game untouched. You're 6'4, 218 lbs yet you threw your forearm into a 6'3, 325 lb nose tackler and flattened him. That means Byers and his people are either naïve or the most uninformed people in the history of college football."

Kid just looks at me the way your dog does after he's eaten a hole in your shoe. He's not sure if I'm about to slap the cuffs on him or slap his hands with a ruler. Personally, I'd settle for the latter.

"So what did I do that's so wrong?"

"You cheated, son."

"No I..."

“People with extraordinary powers are not allowed to participate in regular sporting events. Just as steroids and chemical enhancements are illegal to use and possess as an athlete, so is being a super in professional or amateur sports. It’s obviously unfair and unjust to normal athletes who simply cannot compete or match against you. Anyone discovered being a super or using super technology is automatically disqualified, will have their contract made null and void, will be expelled and prevented from ever competing again, and worst of all, will be publicly embarrassed. Olympic athletes discovered to be supers are stripped of their medals and have their accomplishments and records erased from history. Now while sporting events and other forms of public entertainment do not have any specific laws that regulate them, the U.S. government has chosen to regulate sports and entertainment for the public interest to keep supers from participating. Son, to put it bluntly, if you’re discovered to be a super while playing a professional or amateur sport, you are likely to be charged with a felony for using your abilities against another person with criminal intent.”

“But... all I’m doing is playing football. It’s not fair.”

“True in some regard, but how fair is it for the opposing team? You’re stronger, faster, have superior reflexes and I’m speculating the ability to perceive distance differently than the rest of us, allowing you to focus with more precision on distant targets. Does that sound fair compared to all the regular guys? There’s simply no way for norms to compete against the likes of you.”

“You’re telling me I can never play football again?”

“Not in this capacity. You want to play a pick-up-game with your friends without them suspecting, go on ahead. But you will not be allowed to play on an amateur or professional level, period.”

“That’s just not right.”

“I agree with you, kid. Maybe in the future they’ll change the rules and let people like you play your heart out and beat the living hell out of each other. Maybe they’ll even put spikes on the football, but until that time comes, you’re not going to be allowed to play.”

If the kid’s dreams were made of porcelain, I just smashed them with a baseball bat. The wounded look in his eyes reminded me of the day when I learned of my parents’ murder. Knowing what I do about the kid’s past only made it worse: single mother working 50-60 hours a week trying to put food on the table for him and his two sisters, father bailed on him when he was seven because he was more interested in chasing tail and drinking booze than keeping the lights on so his kid could read. Mother hung out with low-life scumbags that wandered into the neighborhood in order to provide him some sort of male figure in his life. Only one worth two spits was Jorge Dickerson, college football player turned painkiller addict. He showed Tyrone the basics and made him passionate for the game. Then he got himself shot trying to score against the wrong guy to owe money too. He left enough of an impression on the kid that he took his lessons to heart. Only trouble is that empty lot that he and friends played on wasn’t so empty. The building that was torn down ten years ago and turned into an empty lot was owned and operated by Fitzgerald Manufacturing, a company that liked making vehicles for the future but not properly disposing their bizarre waste materials and byproducts. After their main plant was shut down in Century Station, their other plants across the country packed up and left town like a thief in the night, leaving skeleton crews

to deal with the chemical leftovers. Tyrone and a dozen other kids were exposed to something or another. Luckily, he at least stayed “normal” looking. During the seven years I’ve been involved with G.I.G.M.A. I’ve been tracking down and arresting Fitzgerald’s leftovers. Tyrone is next to last on the list. I, at least, want my average on this case to end up being on the positive side, meaning someone walked away alive and not into a S.C.R.E.T. Super Being Holding Facility.

I feel for the kid, I really do. I know what it means to feel like life’s done nothing but give you one bad apple after another. My parents were killed by a Mexican drug cartel. I ended up living with my semi-sober aunt and her ignorant boyfriend. Things don’t work out so hot and I end up in foster care, but lucky for me, my dad’s friend Max Pollard took me in. I spent most of my adolescence trying to conceal my psychic abilities from everyone and fought the urge to use them to gain me special favor. Of course, that went out the window the day I used them in college to help track down a gunman. I finally decide to cheat the system and use my gifts in the best way to help others. I joined the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia, a mere stepping stone to my career with the Secret Service. Five years and a lot of good times mainly with the Presidential Protection Division, known as Agent Zero, the special “psychic” bodyguard for the President of the United States who never leaves his side 24/7. You see and hear a lot of things, learn to keep secrets, and trust no one but the person who holds the office. Sometimes you make mistakes because you trust more in your gut than your talents. You let your sense of duty cloud your judgment, too much reaction and not enough discipline, because you believe you’re just that damn good at your job. All it takes is a single mistake and an innocent 15 year old girl loses her life yet the world declares you a hero just because she happened to be a mutant. Fate has a twisted sense of humor as if to help you rationalize your place in the world. You’re given an assignment to protect a presidential candidate whose policies and views are not just anti-super beings, but he wants them registered like handguns or exiled out of the country and onto containment islands far away from normal humanity. You stand there listening to his bigotry trying your best to ignore his rich, snob friends drink their martinis and talk about having a person like you arrested for crimes against humanity. You stand there looking expressionless, trying to keep your face from turning red, then purple. Blood surges into your fists and your breath comes out raw from your throat. Every fiber of your being demands you act, grab him by the collar and yell at the top of your lungs that the only reason someone like the Cremator hasn’t incinerated his smug self is because of your psychic abilities. But no, you don’t do that, instead you fake an illness during the middle of a campaign fundraising dinner, get a replacement agent, and walk away, only instead of going into isolation you join an agency whose primary goal is to find and locate super-criminals in the United States and to investigate persons or incidents where there is reason to believe “super abilities” were utilized. You investigate ordinary looking citizens who *possibly* possess super abilities in an effort to determine their status; in other words, are they a threat to anyone now or in the immediate future? In order to accomplish your mission, you spend extensive hours gathering intelligence on their activities and home life, conducting extensive background checks, but you stop short of interrogating them before their family and friends, or enticing them to attack you or commit a crime, though you still

circumvent their constitutional and civil rights any way you can get away with, whatever works to get the mission done. And you doubt what exactly is your mission; make life for normal people safer or unite the super-being population against normal people? These are the moments when you feel life has trapped you in an outhouse and turned it upside down. No matter what you do, life stinks and the best you can hope for is to find the air vent and try to catch a whiff of fresh air.

“So what happens now?”

Good question. Do I lie to the kid or be as honest as I can? I’ll split the difference.

“If you can swear to me here and now that you’re done with football then you can leave this afternoon, return home, and we can pretend this little incident never happened. This is your only opportunity and only warning. If you attempt to pursue a football career, you’ll be arrested and incarcerated in a secret location under permanent lockdown with no outside contact with anyone. No lawyers, no phone calls, no visitations, no hope of ever leaving. Trust me son, you don’t want any part of it.”

“So what do I tell my mom, my coach, my...”

“It will be taken care of.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Like I said, it will be taken care of. You won’t have to do a thing. Just tell people you changed your mind and decided you want to pursue other interests outside football.”

“Like what man, what am I suppose to do without football? I don’t have the grades to do anything else. Oh, let me guess, not your problem.”

“No, it is our problem. See that sounds like bitterness and that kind of attitude leads people like you thinking that if the world has turned against them they should do something about it. Trust me, revenge is the last thing you want on your mind.”

“Then tell me what am I suppose to do? How do I take care of my family?”

“Son... I don’t have an answer for ya at this moment. All I can say is football is not an option and neither is taking out your frustration on the world itself. Trust me, something will come along. It always does to those on the side of right.” Cheesy but it’s been effective 7 out of 10 occasions.

Kid continues to look at me like I took a dump on his breakfast which I have in a big way. I’m sensing resentment and frustration, but no direct hostility toward me, so far so good. He’s behaving himself for now. That, of course, could change in twenty-four hours.

“So that’s it? I just go home and pretend I’ve been living a fantasy these past few weeks? I just kiss a college education goodbye?”

All I can do is shrug. It’s not my place to repair the social damage we cause by exiling supers to a life without the public use of their abilities. What you do in private we could care two fudge sticks about, just leave everyone else well enough alone and all will be right in the world, at least that’s what they always say on paper.

I reach into my trench coat pocket and remove a handful of jelly beans from my trusty stash. I’ve loved the candy since I was eight years old. Some people smoke, drink quarts of coffee, go on seven hour shopping sprees, me, I eat gourmet jelly beans. I also produce a throw-away cell phone. “Here, if you have any questions or issues in the next 168 hours you can reach me with this cell phone, afterward it goes dead and becomes a paperweight.

Use it if you want or toss it in the trash. I’m sorry Tyrone, I really am. The government has made great strides to ensure supers like you do not suffer from prejudice and intolerance, while at the same time ensuring the average citizen that its stance against supers is solely in relation to the danger of their powers and capabilities.”

“You practice that line, or what?”

Touché.

“Your choice, kid; as they say in New Hampshire, ‘Live free or die.’ It’s all up to you.”

I turn my back on the kid. Nothing. The kid’s content, at least for now. When he learns his family and friends have been, according to pop culture, “neuralyzed,” he might change his mind. But there isn’t much of a choice. No one made what this kid was doing a priority and now it’s escalated to the point of no return. You either delete the mistakes or you put the kid down like a rabid dog. Some prefer the latter, I’ll take the high road, which according to some is worse. So far I haven’t seen any ill consequences.

“Mr. Benter?”

I stop just before I walk out the door. I don’t turn to look at him. My psychic awareness continues to tell me I’m in no danger.

“Yeah.”

“Do you think what I did was unfair?”

During my junior year in high school I “persuaded” Kristin Stark to go out with me. That same night I got her to un-virgin me. Back then I didn’t think much about what I did, or the ill harm I caused her. I wanted to do the deed and not get caught with the prettiest girl in school. Apparently, afterwards she was unable to maintain a normal relationship with anyone. My face kept reappearing all the time in her mind and in her dreams.

“If you’re feeling guilty then the answer is pretty straightforward, isn’t it son?”

I walk out the door.

I pause for a moment to restore calm to my interior. Well that went off without a hitch. Score another victory for the rational-minded people.

Then an overwhelming sense of dread rises in my gut. The sensation is almost to the point of being painful, which means there is only one interpretation I can draw from; time for me to take immediate evasive action because a deadly threat is about to come. It’s a sixty second forewarning and the clock is ticking.

I intensify my empathy scan. I immediately sense rage and hostility, a malevolent heart beating at a person’s core. Someone wants to cause pain and hurt someone really bad. There no sense of remorse or trepidation. This person has gone amoral and simply doesn’t care.

I turn toward the door and stare hard at it. My gun is out of its holster and ready. Every fiber in my being tells me to smash down the door and take out the kid. Yet the rational side, which I’ve spent years retraining since my fateful mistake those many years ago, screams at me to ask the question, why? A moment ago, the kid felt nothing spiteful toward me. Yes he was pissed, and rightfully so, yet there was enough apprehension in his gut based on what he knew about S.C.R.E.T. to keep him in check. So why all of a sudden turn aggressive? More importantly, it just registered 100% on the crazy meter. What did I do to set the kid off and why so suddenly?

Now this is one of those rare moments I do wish I was a telepath, just so I can know the kid’s intent. I look down and see the

maid must have come by and removed the tray. Damn it. I put my ear to the door. From what I can hear, he's talking to someone on a phone. A quick wave of my left hand and I'm intercepting that call. The microphone button on my coat near my ear allows me to listen in. Yep, he's talking to his mother. She's telling him that she's proud of him and what's he accomplished so far in his life. Just by listening to the sound of his voice, I can tell his breathing is not labored. He's speaking in a lifeless monotone voice. That means his pulse rate is steady, but his blood pressure is likely elevated, but nowhere near the emotional setting that I'm sensing.

It takes a long ten seconds for the light bulb to become bright enough for my thought process to realize Tyrone is not the hostile aggressor my subconscious is warning me about.

I step away from the door troubled.

Surely, Oliver ordered this floor secured, that's standard procedure since Operation U.S.A. went into effect several months ago. I taught him after all. There shouldn't be anyone else on this floor besides me and Tyrone.

Unless someone went into one of the rooms after the evacuation occurred.

I feel a hard punch to my gut.

"Ah hell."

The door behind me explodes into a hundred pieces of kindling. The force knocks me sideways, almost crashing into the wall. Fortunately, I followed Gunter's advice and activated the coat's force field. Except for the jarring of the impact, I feel nothing and I'm not even shaken.

The man in the doorway of the hotel room across from Tyrone's stands at least seven feet tall, his head brushing the high ceiling. His muscles are huge and his clothes hang off him in tatters. His skin glistens from a light source I can only speculate is the sun from a window in the man's room. No, I'm mistaken. His skin is not glistening because of the light. It looks that way because it's metallic.

The guy is what we field agents like to call a tank. A tank is jargon for any super-being with enhanced strength, a heightened endurance, and remarkable resistance to injury. They can be big or small, short and fat, or tall and thin. They are simply tough as nails and dish out as much as they can take, sometimes more. This guy, however, had the extra bonus of having his flesh converted into metal, making him nearly indestructible. These clowns are a nightmare for S.C.R.E.T. alone to deal with, and here I am, all alone with just a force field keeping him from flattening me like a bug meeting the windshield of a freight train.

"You ain't getting me, cop. I ain't goin' back to jail for anybody."

"Hey, no problem pal, I'm not after you in the first place."

"Liar."

"No, I'm serious. You are not my target, god's honest truth."

"Scott, what's the call?" my phone chimes in. "Respond, respond."

"Liar."

I come up on one knee, facing the huge man with the tattered clothes and the snarling voice. I aim my gun and in rapid succession shoot him three times in the chest, center mass. I'm not sure how effective or wise it might be, but I have to at least give it a try.

Mind you, these are .50 caliber armor-piercing rounds. I can turn an engine block into Swiss cheese given enough ammo.

The bullets do absolutely nothing.

He doesn't even stagger. I might as well have thrown jelly beans at him.

Not good.

This is not good at all.

He was pissed off before. Now I've just made it worse.

I see Tyrone open his door.

"What the hell is going... holy..."

He tried swatting at Tyrone but the kid ducked him with ease and tried leveling him with a right cross. His fist hitting the tank in the face made the sound of a cheese ball thrown against a bank vault door. He drew his bloody knuckles back for a second haymaker but the big man struck him with his elbow. The kid skidded across the carpet hallway for a short distance before snapping himself up and around.

You had to admire the kid's effort, as foolhardy as I was trying to take him down with a gun, he seemed determined to put this big man down for a reason I couldn't imagine. Maybe he thought the guy was a S.C.R.E.T. agent in an exo-skeleton, or he was having a bullying flashback from his grade school days. Whatever the case, the kid fought with a tenacity I've seen only among true heroic champions.

The kid came at him.

The big man brought his fist down on him like a gavel. The impact would have killed any normal human, but the kid was back up almost instantly and hit him square in the face with a left hook.

Hmm, his combat skills were not half bad, very amateur at best, but more than capable of holding his own.

The big man swatted him back again.

The kid came back for a third time and hit him again, full in the face.

The big man, again, just flicked the kid away; this time sending through the wall and into the kid's hotel room.

He turned his attention back toward me.

Only now he couldn't see me anymore. A few months ago I developed a psychic ability to remain undetected when in plain sight. As long as my intent is not to harm this guy, I'm effectively invisible to his senses. He could walk down the hall, even with me standing here, and he would subconsciously avoid colliding with me. Well, in theory, he wouldn't, but being a tank he is likely to not even bother opening doors or moving out of the way of anything, even oncoming traffic. The point is he couldn't see me. Problem is if I contacted my backup, that would end the psychic influence and I'd become visible again. So I am kind of in between a rock and a hard place, literally.

The kid came up from behind and tackled the big man. The giant threw the kid off his back, turned and hit him so hard he flew through the air and smashed into the far wall. The impact blew out the wall and shattered the nearby window. The blow knocked him completely senseless and by the time he came to, the fight was over.

He returned his attention toward me. I was visible now with the GASP in my hand.

"Don't make me use this!" I yelled.

He growled once and charged.

"Last chance!"

He was six paces and drawing closer.

I fired.

Even when Gunter's tries explaining it to me, even I don't fully grasp what the weapon does but here it goes to the best of my

ability. The pistol fires a nearly invisible energy ray that functions on the equivalent of a particle beam. It's an ultra-high-energy beam that damages a material target by affecting its atomic and molecular structure. So regardless of whatever it's made of, the target sustains damage. Even those claiming to be invulnerable, supernatural, immortal, undead, etc., sustain real injury. The big difference is my gun doesn't just disrupt an object's atomic and molecular structure. It attempts to accelerate a tiny portion of its particle matter, thus creating a low-velocity, unstable micro-black hole, which in a matter of seconds disintegrates and completely destroys whatever the beam strikes, consuming all of its matter then dissipating, shrinking, and ultimately vanishing before it can harm anything outside of the target. I shoot a car, but only the car will be destroyed. The passengers and everything not physically linked together (like the stuff in the trunk) are unharmed. According to Gunter, only a few beings in this universe can withstand this weapon, namely, those with gravity manipulation/wave powers, energy absorbers, and those resistant to particle beams. On the downside, the longer I fire the weapon, the more I put myself in danger. Every seven seconds the beam is sustained, there is an ever increasing 4% chance that I'll be struck with an energy wash that will either incinerate me or have me eaten by a black hole. Best thing, Gunter and I are the only individuals able to make the gun fire because of the special bio-metric scanner in the trigger. Anyone else tries to fire the gun and they're automatically struck by the energy wash.

This is the reason I'm so hesitant to use this gun. I can fire a single pulse and it will kill any ordinary person. I fire a continuous beam at someone like this tank and his brute strength, physical endurance, and metal hide won't mean diddly-squat. No second chances, almost no chance of recovery, and almost impossible to heal against. It's the weapon of an emotionless, uncaring machine, which I am anything but.

The beam struck the tank in the chest.

It looked like for a moment a miniature bomb had exploded in front of the man.

He screamed.

You couldn't see anything happening. What was going on was occurring at the molecular level, but right now his atoms and molecules were being sucked down into a microscopic black hole. I suspect it feels like someone jamming a shopvac with an industrial size motor into your gut and turning it on. The big man was resilient. He'd last longer than most beings in the universe, but eventually he would die. The question is, did I want to wait that long? The longer I maintain the beam the more I put my own life into jeopardy. Furthermore, this is no way for anyone to die. No matter what you've done in this world, having your insides pulled apart at the molecular level was beyond cruel and unusual.

The tank dropped to one knee, still fighting it. He tried to rise but the pain was simply too overwhelming for him. The moment his metal form was eaten away, the black hole would consume his organic flesh.

Ten seconds later, my moral fiber kicked in. I remember what happened the last time I pulled this weapon on a person and the horror that I witnessed haunts me more than all the bad things I've ever done.

Five seconds later, I deactivate the beam.

The big man collapsed backward.

I holster my weapon.

"Agent Benter," my coat barks at me. "Do you need assistance, please respond?"

"I'm here. Stand down, repeat stand down. The target is not aggressive nor is he retaliating. Stand down, do not engage."

"Then what the holy hell is going on up there?"

"I need an emergency evac for the target. He's sustained possible severe injuries from a hostile engagement with an UNSUB (Unidentified Super Being). I also need a clean-up crew and a full decontamination screening for the entire fifth floor."

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, couldn't be any better. Nothing I like better than running into an UNSUB who somehow managed to avoid our surveillance but no one seemed to have noticed people."

I make my way over to the tank. He looks relatively okay. No lasting damage that I can physically see.

"Hey buddy, you okay?"

"What...did you do to me?"

"Hey, listen. I need you to do me a favor. First, you need to calm down and relax. Make yourself nice and cozy. Go back to your flesh form. Can you do that for me?"

"Uh-yeah."

"Great job, pal. Thanks a lot. See, we have a situation here and I need all non-essential people to return to their room and stay there until further notice. I mean don't come out for any reason unless you hear me knock three times, okay? Just ignore anything you hear once you close the door to your room unless you hear me knock three times. Can you do that for me?"

"Uh-sure. Say, what did you do to me?"

"Nothing at all, sir. What you felt was probably some indigestion I'm betting. You shouldn't eat the food left on other people's trays. No telling what you might consume."

"Yeah, I guess I shouldn't have done that."

"No problem, sir. I just need you to get up and return to your room and wait for me to knock three times. Can you do that for me, it's really important."

"But the door to my room is broken."

"True enough. So why don't you use this one instead until I come get you with the three knocks. Does that sound good to you?"

"Uh-yeah."

"Good, now stay in here, do nothing, respond to nothing you hear, unless it's me knocking three times. Got it?"

"I got it."

"Good."

I close the door.

Well, that was easy enough. It usually doesn't go that smoothly. Even the average person's mind puts up some sort of fight against psionic coercion. This guy probably has the mental toughness of a gummy bear.

I go over to check on Tyrone. I give him a quick primary survey. He's conscious barely, breathing okay, and definitely has a pulse; a little erratic but steady. As for secondary injuries, he looks as if he went toe to toe with the meanest enforcer in a hockey brawl. I'm pretty sure he's going to be okay, but no reason to take any chances.

Right on cue, Oliver comes bursting in from the emergency stairwell with his Beretta Model 92 9mm Automatic Pistol. Seeing his gun makes me want to burst out a laugh, but I'm too tired to make the effort.

"Scott, you all right?"

“Peachy.”

“Where the UNSUB?”

“I’ve taken care of him. Get this kid some medical help.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“This whole mission has been seriously compromised. There’s no way you can’t explain away his injuries. Take him to General Electrocorp.”

“Uh, Scott, you don’t have the authority to bypass security—“

“Who’s the lead agent here?”

He makes a heavy sigh. Kid’s got to learn his place in life.

“You are.”

“And who let an UNSUB get involved in my Op.”

“Hey, I had nothing to do with some UNSUB showing up—“

“That’s not how it’s going to look in my report.”

“So it’s going to be like that hunh?”

“Unless I get what I want and I want that kid taken to S.C.R.E.T. HQ to get looked over. Can’t have a guy like him go to a normal hospital. If we want to maintain any shred of integrity brought on by this bungled op, we need to salvage something. That UNSUB put a big monkey wrench in our whole program, and I’ll be damned if some technicality is going to ruin my gold star record.”

“So let the rookie take the fall. I see how you are. I’ll remember you next time.”

“You better or next time I won’t be pulling your butt out of the fire. How you feeling son?”

Tyrone shakes his head and manages to sit up. “Like I’ve been run over.”

He climbs to his feet and looks around

“Where did that big guy go?”

“Don’t worry about him, he’s taken care of. My friend Oliver here is going to have you checked out at a special hospital. And while you’re there, take a look around. You might find some possible career opportunities.”

Now Oliver knew my play. Yet all he could do at this point was grin and bear it. What could he do, he was in charge of setting up the op and somehow Mr. Tank got mixed up in it all. The only person Hamilton could yell at for a mission failure was him. Me, I was clean and as guilt free as possible, and feeling pretty proud of myself if I do say.

“Come on kid. I got some folks who will want to check you out.”

“Whatever you say mister, say um...thanks for whatever you did back there.”

“Actually it was you who saved my bacon. I’ll have to return the favor whenever.”

“So, what did you do with the UNSUB?”

“You take care of him and let me worry about the UNSUB after the clean-up crew arrives.”

The two of them took the elevator, leaving me all by my lonesome. Well not entirely true.

I’ve got no choice. It has to be done. I rattle my knuckles on the front door.

“Hello sir, it’s me again, Agent Benter.

Right on cue, the tank, still in his regular human form opens the door and steps out.

“Yeah what can I do for...”

I fire a shot point-blank into the guy’s head, which promptly exploded like a melon dropped from a great height. The tank,

headless now, stood for a moment, his hand still thrust out to shake my hand. Then the body collapsed.

I re-holster my M1 and pop a few more jelly beans into my mouth. Mmm, Island Punch and Pina Colada. There are some days when I feel morally ambiguous, others where I’m not all to certain which way my moral compass indicates. I’ll have no trouble sleeping over my actions with the tank. Just another day, another dollar, and another dead super too stupid to listen to reason. As for Tyrone, I think things will improve for him. Someone will give him a nice recommendation and he’ll likely start training in the S.A.T.A.R (Super-being, Acquisition, Training, Assimilation, and Rebirth) program. It’s done wonders so far with the Sentinels of Liberty and Justice. Who knows, he could end up employed by The Sector or any other government or military unit that use Super-Ops, legally or not.

Either way, the kid gets his wish: a fresh start with lots of chances for advancement and the finances to take care of his mother and sisters. I got a feeling you’ll do well kid. If not then I’ll be the one coming after you and next time I won’t hesitate or feel any compassion. You’ll either come quietly or I’ll shoot you in the face. It’s just that easy.

Half hour later, I manage to sneak away after giving my report. I’m back in the Pacer ignoring orders to come into the office and do some important paperwork, provide testimony for both cases, and document all that went on. In the meantime, I’m heading toward my favorite dive, Phasma, even though it’s only noon. It’s one of those unusual bar & grill joints in which the food is great and the liquor is cheap. A person from AA should meet most of these people at the door like a Walmart greeter and ask them, “Really, you’re in here this early in the day?”

I take my usual spot and order me some buffalo wings in medium sauce and a ginger ale.

I start thinking how the day went, pondering if anything could have been done differently if I stayed in bed. A kid lost his dream but hopefully found a career that will be even more fulfilling. An unstable super is no longer walking the streets. Yet best of all, I got to prove that a G.I.G.M.A. agent can do all right by himself without having to rely on a trigger happy paramilitary unit with a shoot it now and I.D it later attitude. I did the agency proud and I feel good about what I accomplished. Nice to put a check in the win column too. Two hundred more to go and maybe I can wipe my guilty conscious clean.

I look across the table and imagine Max is in his former spot drinking a beer and screaming for the Ultropolis Wildlife to throw together some decent passes for once. Guy was a hockey fanatic but refused to walk in the snow much less put on a pair of skates. I miss him so much, especially when there’s no one to celebrate a job well done. Not sure if he’d be proud of my career choice. He’d likely ask me why I’m arresting my own people. I’d probably tell him that everyone on this planet belongs to the same family, only some of us are more special than others. It’s my job to keep the special people’s ego in check. Some say I’ve eaten my fill of humble pie and it’s time I start sinking my teeth into some serious flesh. But that’s not my style. Yes, I have a style and it means more than my yellow coat. I carry myself just the way I’ve always done, one day at a time. Max used to say, “Doesn’t matter what the laws are. A true hero will shine and accomplish his goals whether they praise him or not.” I raise my glass and praise him for his words of everyman wisdom. I wonder what tomorrow will have in store to me. I can hardly wait.

# Character Statistics

## Scott Benter

**Real Name:** Scott Benter.

**Occupation:** G.I.G.M.A. Special Operative Field Agent (Intelligence Division), Former Washington D.C. Police Officer, Former member of the Secret Service Presidential Protection Division (Agent Zero).

**Alignment:** Unprincipled.

**Power Category:** Latent Psionic/G.I.G.M.A. Field Agent with two Super Inventions.

**Experience Level:** 7th

**Hit Points:** 50. **S.D.C.:** 61.

**P.P.E.:** 18

**I.S.P.:** 116

**Appearance:** Young looking, lean and athletic, with blond hair and blue eyes. He usually has his expensive sunglasses on. He also wears a long, ugly, yellow trench coat and professional attire. Scott is always dressed for the occasion. In his coat he always keeps a bag of Jelly Bellies.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 17, M.E. 20, M.A. 18, P.S. 15, P.P. 17, P.E. 20, P.B. 14, Spd 31.

**Age:** 37, **Sex:** Male, **Height:** 6 feet (1.8 m), **Weight:** 179 lbs (80.55 kg).

**Cybernetics:** G.I.G.M.A. Security Clearance Access Chip, Tracer/Locator Chip, Government I.D. Computer Chip, and one Sensor Left Hand (Bio-System Hand, with living tissue) with data transmitted electronically to a wristband receiver (audio & digital readout on an LCD screen; looks like a wristwatch). Comes with the following: Air and Surface Temperature Reader, Motion Detector, Radiation Detector, Radar Detector, Gyro-Compass, and Clock Calendar.

**Physical Psionics:** Deaden Senses, Summon Inner Strength, and Teleport Object.

**Sensitive Psionics:** Empathy, Object Read, Mask I.S.P. & Psionics, Mind Block, See Aura, Sense Evil, Sixth Sense, and Total Recall.

**Super Psionics:** Hypnotic Suggestion and Psionic Invisibility.

**Super Inventions:** The Yellow Trench Coat, A.R. 9, S.D.C. 180, Power Level: Sixth, Repairable: Only by a few of the elite high-tech labs or by Gunter himself.

Major Super Ability: Cloaking.

Minor Super Abilities: Frequency Absorption, Gravitational Plane, and Personal Force Field (100 S.D.C.).

Gunter's Atomic Separator Pistol, This is perhaps the most impressive weapon Gunter has ever invented. The pistol fires an energy beam that functions on the equivalent of a particle beam pistol. Like all PBW, the beam automatically bypasses the A.R. of a target, including all Natural Armor Ratings. The longer the beam continues to strike whatever form of matter it is impacting (including magic and supernatural), it is attempting to accelerate the particle matter of the object, thus creating a low-velocity, unstable, micro-black hole, which in a matter of seconds disintegrates and completely destroys whatever the beam struck, consuming all of its matter then dissipating, shrinking, and ultimately vanishing before it can harm anything outside of the object the beam struck. Meaning if the beam strikes an automobile, all of its matter (everything physically connected together) would be consumed but the passen-

gers and everything in the trunk (and not physically connected/attached) would be unharmed. So powerful is this effect even those invulnerable and immortal are destroyed. The gun never needs recharging because its power source comes from a single cell containing strange matter. Scott only uses the GASP's full effect as a weapon of last resort or if the foe is big and mean enough. Range: 1035 feet (315 m), Damage: 1D4x10 for a single shot, a continuous beam requires a saving throw of 18 or better (only P.E. attribute bonus can be applied) or the subject takes 4D6x10 points of damage every 7 seconds, first to S.D.C. then to Hit Points. The beam does full damage to EVERYTHING, including those invulnerable, supernatural, immortal, undead, M.D.C., etc. Nothing can withstand being consumed by the micro-black hole, except those with gravity manipulation/wave powers (impervious), Energy Absorption, or particle beam resistance. Side Effect: Every 7 seconds of using the beam, the gun wielder has an increasing 4% chance (after one melee round, 8% chance) of being affected himself (same save). Even if the owner is safely able to keep firing the beam after one minute (32% chance), the owner suffers 1D6x10 points of damage and permanently loses 1 P.E. attribute point, and continues to do so with each continuous 7 seconds the beam is affecting a target. **Note:** Anything that successfully makes the saving throw still takes 1D4x10 points of damage. Living things heal damage back three times slower and inorganic objects cannot be repaired by normal means (the damage is permanent, meaning some of the matter has been devoured by the black hole). Rate of Fire: Single shot (one attack/action) or continuous beam (maintaining the continuous beams uses up all attacks for the rest of the melee round), Feed: Unlimited, A.R.: 15, S.D.C.: 200. Repairable: Only by a few of the elite, high-tech labs (and even they are -75% do anything with this gun) or by Gunter himself. Security System: The gun will only fire when Scott Benter or Gunter pulls the trigger (special biometric scanner). If anyone else tries to fire the gun it automatically backfires on them with a 7 second energy burst, requiring them to make the saving throw. Bonuses: The weapon doesn't need a sight or its owner to aim all that well. Superior sensors in the gun enable the weapon to lock onto whatever the gun's wielder is looking at, meaning if Scott is able to keep his eye on a flying insect, the gun will get a +5 strike bonus to hit the fly without any movement, size, speed, or distance penalties. The beam is nearly invisible, making opponents -3 to parry or dodge.

**Combat Training:** Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

**Attacks per Melee:** 5 (2 initial +3 from hand to hand).

**Combat Bonuses:** +2 to initiative, +2 to strike, +4 to parry, +4 to dodge, +4 to roll with punch/fall, +3 to pull punch, +2 to disarm, and +3 to Perception Rolls.

**Saving Throws:** He needs a 12 or better to save vs psionics, +3 to save vs insanity, +2 to save vs possession, +7 to save vs Horror Factor, +10% to save vs coma/death, and +3 to save vs magic & poison.

**Combat Skills:** Karate Punch 2D4, Power Blow 4D4 (counts as two attacks), Backhand Strike 1D6, Elbow/Forearm 1D6, Knee 1D6, Karate Kick 2D4, Snap Kick 1D6, Tripping/Leghook (cannot be parried, must dodge or knockdown), Axe Kick 2D8, Jump Kick 6D6, Flying Jump Kick 4D6, Body Flip/Throw 1D6 plus P.S. damage bonus (lose initiative and



1 attack/action), all Holds, Paired Weapons and Critical strike on an unmodified roll of 18-20.

**Other Bonuses:** +3% to all skills and 50% trust/intimidate.

**Educational Background:** Special Training.

**Common Skills:** Reads, writes and speaks English 98%, Mathematics: Basic 98%, Pilot: Automobile 94%, Pilot: Combat Driving, Pilot: Airplane 91%, Pilot: Avtran 92%, Lore: Psychics & Super Beings 84%, and Language and Literacy: Spanish and German 98%/94%.

**Espionage Program:** Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, Disguise 80%, Impersonation 82%/68%, Intelligence 83%, Tracking (people) 83%, Detect Concealment 73%, Interrogation 78%, Surveillance 83%, I.D. Undercover Agents 76%, Undercover Ops 95%, Sensory Equipment 78%, and Optic Systems 78%.

**Law Enforcement Program:** W.P. Handguns (+3 to aim/+1 to burst), Crime Scene Investigation 80%, Law (general) 80%, and Streetwise 58%.

**Learned Skill:** W.P. Energy Pistol (+3 to strike/+1 to burst).

**Secondary Skills:** Athletics (General), Swimming 88%, History 98%/78%, Pick Locks 68%, Basic Electronics 68%, Prowl 63%, Computer Operation 96%, Research 78%, Pick Pocket 63%, Wardrobe & Grooming 81%, First Aid 73%, Automotive Mechanics 78%, Recognize Weapon Quality 38%, and Public Speaking 43%.

**Money:** Scott makes \$4,200 a week and most of his living expenses are taken care of. He can also receive special bonuses for the apprehension of certain criminals (any of G.I.G.M.A. or S.C.R.E.T.'s top ten most wanted under his supervision and leadership).

**Weapons:** These are his favorite weapons, although he has access to any type of weapon in the G.I.G.M.A. Arsenal. Although they prefer he not use his weapons.

**M1, Guncrafter Industries Model No. 1** (a variant of the M1911 handgun, modified for the .50 caliber GI cartridge with A.R. rounds): Range: 225 feet (68.5 m), Damage: 7D6, Rate of Fire: Single shot or Semi-Automatic, Penetration Value 8, Feed: 7 round standard-capacity magazine). Bonuses: The AP ammo and stopping power of this gun lowers a target's A.R. by three (or get a +3 to strike against armored targets). The recoil of this .50 caliber gun is about the same as a .45. Scott always keeps 1D4+1 extra clips on his person.

**Chem Rounds:** These bullets are filled with either a smoke-producing compound or a type of gas that erupts on impact. Regardless of the chemical or compound, they create a 10 foot (3 m) cloud in diameter. Opponents whose vision is obscured by smoke are -6 to strike, parry, and dodge. Gas rounds can be filled with tear gas, tranquilizer (knockout gas), or any chemical found in the Bionic or Robot chemical sprays. The poisonous vapor does 2D6 damage for every melee round a person is in the toxic cloud. Roll to save every round. A successful save means no additional damage, but the penalties persist. Penalties: In addition to physical damage, the victim(s) feels weak, reduces Spd by 20%, P.S. by 1D6+2 points and the victim is -1 on initiative and -1 to strike. The duration lasts while in the cloud and for 1D6+1 melee rounds after exiting the cloud.

**Brass Knuckles:** 1D4 + Punch Damage and P.S. damage bonus.

**Armor:** When the mission calls for it, Scott will wear a Point-Blank Vest (A.R. 10, 70 S.D.C.) or a full suit of Hard Armor (A.R. 16, 260 S.D.C.).

**Equipment & Vehicles:** G.I.G.M.A. provides him access to all sorts of high-tech equipment and gizmos. Scott has a G.I.G.M.A. smartphone valued at \$2,000.

**Dwayne:** A yellow, 1979 AMC Pacer D/L. Scott loves this car. This is his baby. He had G.I.G.M.A. make this a Souped-Up Car (see *Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Edition*, page 217), with bulletproof windows, souped-up turbo engine with silent running (+15% to prowl), satellite/CD stereo, theft-proof locks, theft-alarm system, armored/self-sealing tires, nightvision windows (enables him to drive without headlights and see perfectly at night, +15% to prowl), and radar display. There is also a dispenser full of jelly beans.

# PALLADIUM

# ICE DWELLERS

## Official Source Material for the *Palladium Fantasy RPG®* and *Rifts®*

Inspired by the art and ideas of Charles Walton.  
Developed by Matthew Clements and Kevin Siembieda.

Written by Matthew Clements

## Ice Bearmen

Far to the north in the Palladium continent, Rangers, woodsmen and whalers tell tales of Bearmen who feast upon raw flesh and blubber, swim like creatures of the sea and have coats of stark white fur. Isolated on the edge of the world, living in remote villages and temporary camps out on seasonal ice shelves, these Ice Bearmen are not a myth, but a rare and reclusive people with a tribal society based upon fishing, whaling and hunting. Ice Bearmen seldom travel beyond the harsh lands of snow and ice that they call home, coming down from the mountains and into the lowlands only in the winter when the Great Northern Wilderness is covered in deep snow. Ice Bearmen consider most other humanoid species as weaklings. They respect only the strongest and bravest of individuals, and all people, regardless of race, are called 'Greenwalkers,' a term that is not just descriptive but a derogatory reference that, to Ice Bearmen, is synonymous with soft, weak, 'civilized' people. Ice Bearmen migrate with the snow and seldom see the green grass and leaves of spring, summer or autumn for they are creatures of winter, snow and ice who live hard, fight hard, play hard. Even the Wolfen are regarded as Greenwalkers and considered soft, and the conniving Coyles are despised as tricksters and lazy cowards. Only their brown Bearmen cousins, the ferocious (if minuscule by comparison) Kankoran, and Ice Giants are considered to be equals or worthy adversaries and allies.



Like their more widely dispersed, brown-coated cousins, Ice Bearmen are few in number. Most of the year they follow the frozen ice pack that extends from the coast in northern regions, tracking seals and fishing to feed themselves. They live in small tribes and family groups, gathering together into larger villages during summer, and may travel vast distances following prey or in seasonal migrations. Small hunting parties and lone individuals regularly pursue herds of elk or mammoth for hundreds of miles across the Great Northern Wilderness. They use their natural swimming skills as well as kayaks made from skin, wood and whalebone to help bring in seals and whales. Most are proficient with harpoons, spears, hooks and lines. Ice Bearman craftsmen make incredible jewelry out of bone, tusks and walrus ivory, as well as decorative items like pins and combs or handles for weapons. Ivory is as close to a currency as they have, a precious substance that can be traded for food, shelter, clothing or safe passage. Intact tusks and large bones are particularly valuable, necessary for constructing sod and animal hide shelters and used in the largest weapons and artistic carvings.

Ice Bearmen worship nature and the land itself, as well as the *Winter Spirit*, whom they portray as an ethereal, white dragon of incredible size. Some Wolfen priests who have studied the Ice Bearmen believe this 'Winter Spirit' might be *Kym-nark-mar*, one of the deific God-Dragons praised by the followers of Dragonwright, but anyone who has encountered the Ice Bearmen knows that, while they may have little to no contact with outside religions, they definitely pray and sacrifice to *Ice Dragons*, particularly the *Winterserpents* who lord over the ice shelves and frozen seas that the Ice Bearmen call home. Ice Bearmen have their own strong religious beliefs, rejecting the traditional northern gods Algor and Od, the first as the deity of the Bizantine humans and the second as an enemy of dragons, which they hold sacred in all forms. Tribes of Ice Bearmen bring sacrificial prisoners and captured loot to the lairs of their dragon idols. They have no need for gold, silver or the metal armor used by humans and Wolfen, and gladly offer up such trinkets in return for the

dragons' favor. That favor is often an enchanted weapon that can be used against a tribe's enemies. Likewise, whenever Ice Bearmen encounter a Winterserpent, Ice Dragon, or sometimes other types of dragons, under attack or in distress, they rush to its aid.

### Ice Bearman R.C.C.

**Also Known As:** The Winter Bearman, White Bearman and Dragon Bearman.

**Alignment:** Any, but most often Unprincipled (10%), Anarchist (40%), and Aberrant (40%); 10% other.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 2D4+6, M.E. 2D4+6, M.A. 2D6, P.S. 4D6+6, P.P. 3D6+4, P.E. 4D6+8, P.B. 2D6+8, Spd 4D4 running; 3D6+12 swimming.

**Hit Points:** P.E. attribute number plus 1D6 per level of experience. (1D6 M.D.C. +1 M.D.C. per level of experience on Rifts Earth and other Mega-Damage environments).

**S.D.C.:** 2D4x10+20, plus those gained from O.C.C.s and Physical skills. (1D4x10 M.D.C. on Rifts® Earth and other Mega-Damage environments.)

**Natural A.R.:** 12

**Horror Factor:** 14

**Average P.P.E.:** 3D6+5

**O.C.C.s Available:** Most tend to be Rangers or fighters equivalent to the Mercenary Warrior. Bearmen have no interest in learning magic, seeing it as the realm of the gods and creatures like dragons, but adore magic weapons and simple magic items, especially magical ice weapons. (On Rifts Earth can be Wilderness Scouts, Hunter/Trappers and similar outdoorsmen, as well as Vagabonds.)

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 100 feet (30.5 m), poor day vision (about 120 feet/36.6 m), superior sense of smell and hearing, Prowl 28%, track by smell 78%, Climb 60%/50%, Recognize Poison 90% and Swim 90%. Ice Bearmen are extremely at home in the water, can hold their breath for 1D4+4 minutes, and can swim for up to two hundred miles (320 km) without resting.

**Cold Resistance (special):** Their heavy fur and blubber make them resistant to cold and they are virtually impervious to hypothermia and frostbite, even when immersed in freezing water. Ice Bearmen only take half damage from cold-based magic attacks; no damage from ordinary cold and weather.

**Consume Raw Meat (special):** Ice Bearmen are accustomed to a diet of raw meat, bones, fat and blubber. Their bleak habitat forces them to be both scavenger and predator, with robust stomachs that can handle meat that has gone rotten or become water-logged. Their raging metabolisms need large amounts of flesh, however, with an adult able to consume over 50 lbs (22.5 kg) of meat in a single sitting. An Ice Bearman needs at least 10 lbs (4.5 kg) of meat per day to avoid hunger, and at least 1-2 lbs (0.45 to 0.9 kg) of fat alone. Away from blubber, their traditional source of calories, they will crave butter, cream, lard and any other fatty food they can find.

Ice Bearmen are known for gorging upon the bodies of their enemies following a battle, sometimes out of hunger, sometimes as part of a cannibalistic ritual in which a warrior eats the heart and innards of his enemy to symbolically gain their strength or to show their respect to a worthy opponent. One way or another, after seven days of insufficient dietary input, an Ice Bearman may not be able to resist the urge to 'forage' (steal food), or might even start looking at plump humans and other intelligent humanoids as possible meals.

**Attacks per Melee:** +1 attack per melee round, in addition to hand to hand combat training.

**Damage:** Claws: 2D6 plus P.S. bonus, power punch: 4D6 plus P.S. bonus (counts as two attacks), bite: 2D4, head butt: 1D6, or by weapon (prefer large axes, spears and harpoons).

**R.C.C. Bonuses:** +1 on initiative, and +1 to save vs Horror Factor at levels 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12 and 14.

**Magic:** None.

**Psionics:** Standard.

**Average Life Span:** 55 years.

**Habitat:** Ice Bearmen are found almost exclusively in coastal regions. Most live along the northern coast of the Great Northern Wilderness, with others in the Northern Hinterlands, away from the Shadow Colonies of Bizantium, with the bay known as the Dragon Claw playing home to many tribes. There is a second population of Ice Bearmen that live in cold, remote coastlines of the Land of the Damned and up in the Northern Mountains, but they are primarily cut off from their brethren to the east by the human Kingdom of Bizantium and its ships and seafaring citizens. There is some interaction between the two populations, but the journey across the Northern Hinterlands and through the Northern Mountains is long, cold and perilous. Going through Bizantine waters is more direct, and the area around the islands is ice-free for most of the year thanks to a warm gulf stream current that flows from the west. Ice Bearmen stand out in the open water, and following the coast is a dangerous proposition with fishing villages, ports and Bizantine soldiers to avoid.

**Languages:** Most speak Wolfen the same as other Bearmen, but all Ice Bearmen are fluent in their own ancestral language exclusive to their subspecies, 25% speak Dragonese and 15% also have knowledge of either Giantese or Faerie Speak.

**Enemies:** Ice Bearmen are hostile towards virtually all outsiders, especially humans, Coyles, Bug Bears, Harpies, demons and monstrous creatures like Winter Storm Ice Demons.

**Allies:** 'Normal' Bearmen are seen as close cousins. Kankoran are one of the few species Ice Bearmen respect, some even referring to them as "Little Brothers." Wolfen frontiersmen, Drakin and Faerie Folk are tolerated. They have a special affinity for fellow creatures of the north like *Ice Pixies* and *Frost Giants*, and worship *Ice Dragons* and *Winterserpents* as living manifestations of the Winter Spirit.

**Physical Appearance:** Massive, bipedal creatures with the heads of bears and thick, streamlined bodies covered in white fur. They have black snouts and dark claws, and wear little more than a loincloth, even in freezing weather.

**Size:** 10-12 feet tall (3 to 3.6 m).

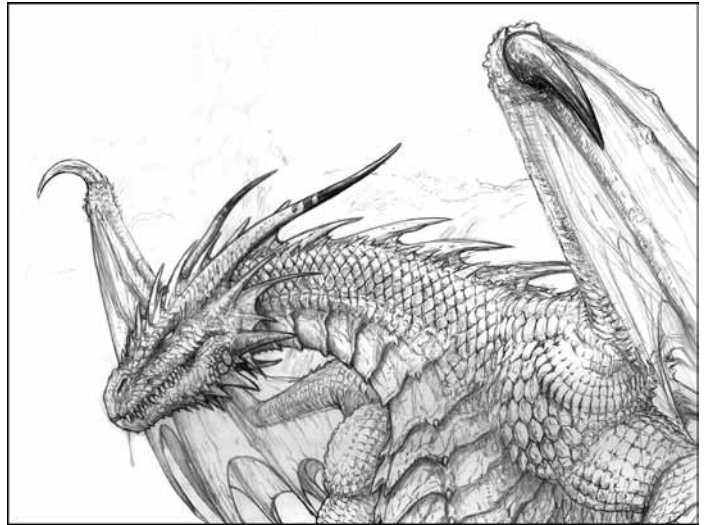
**Weight:** 1,200-1,500 pounds (540 to 675 kg).

**Notes:** Like their more southerly cousins, Ice Bearmen shun suits of armor. Not only does heavy armor restrict movement, but it also makes swimming dangerous or impossible. They will wear pieces of armor made of bone, hides and treated wood, but have a natural disdain for metal, except when it comes to weapons. Ice Bearmen may wear armllets, wristbands, vambraces, gauntlets, gloves, belts, and similar equipment, but it is rare to see one even in partial metal armor.

**Equipment & Weapons of Note:** An Ice Bearman's standard equipment will include two harpoons, two wooden spears and a stout club with a head made from stone or bone. Metal weapons like swords and axes will have to be captured from

intruders like human explorers or encroaching Wolfen, Coyles or demons. Ice Bearmen also typically carry 50-200 pounds (22.5 to 90 kg) of blubber and preserved meat (or raw in cold climes) with them to keep up their energy levels on long journeys. 'Money' will be in the form of ivory rather than gold and silver.

(On Rifts Earth, pretty much the same as above, and love Vibro-Blades and other M.D. blade weapons and magic weapons. Including TW weapons, provided the character has sufficient P.P.E. to operate it.)



## Winterserpents

Lords of the icy north, Winterserpents are immensely powerful and exceedingly rare dragons brimming with elemental energy. Scholars of the more learned races have identified them as cousins of Ice Dragons, a separate species with an even closer relationship to the elemental forces of water and ice. Natural-born Warlocks, they are found almost exclusively in the northern reaches of the continent where cold temperatures, blizzards, heavy snowfall and icy seas are the norm.

In the southern, more temperate reaches of the Palladium World, Winterserpents are almost unheard of. During winter, they sometimes venture down out of their northern habitat, searching for items to fill up their treasure hoards, seeking out old allies and enemies or simply enjoying their travels before rising temperatures make most of the world too uncomfortably hot again. One might linger for a summer, making its lair atop a snow-capped mountain or in an alpine lake, but they are sure to retreat back to the Great Northern Wilderness, Northern Hinterlands or the Land of the Damned the next time the seasons change.

Like Ice Dragons, Winterserpents occupy an almost mythological place of reverence amongst northern races like the Wolfen, and, in particular, the Ice Bearmen, who see them as a living link to the great Winter Spirit that brings about the blessed change of seasons. Winterserpents reward their followers with simple enchantments, amulets, fine pieces of ivory and even the occasional lesser rune weapon or powerful magic item from their collections. Unlike times past, when a Winterserpent might try to insinuate itself into Wolfen politics or interfere with human kingdoms like Bizantium, most Winterserpents live reclusive lives amongst their natural element and prefer the adulation of the Ice Bearmen to the uncertain mix of jealousy, fear, awe and respect that they

receive from most other humanoid species. To these favored worshippers and protectors, Winterserpents will bestow gifts of magic weapons, usually large swords, axes, daggers and spears.

## Winterserpent R.C.C.

**Alignment:** Any.

**Attributes (adult):** I.Q. 3D6+8, M.A. 2D6+12, M.E. 2D6+12, P.S. 2D6+28, P.P. 2D6+16, P.E. 3D6+16, P.B. 3D6+14, Spd 2D4x10 running or 3D6x10+50 flying; Supernatural P.S.

**Attributes (hatchling):** I.Q. 3D6+2, M.A. 2D6+6, M.E. 2D6+8, P.S. 2D6+14, P.P. 2D6+8, P.E. 3D6+8, P.B. 2D6+9, Spd 3D6+30 running or 2D4x10 flying.

**Size:** 25-40 feet tall (7.6 to 12 m) on average. Up to 80 feet (24 m) long when full grown, half that for hatchlings.

**Weight:** 24-30 tons.

**Natural A.R.:** Adult: 14. Hatchling: 10.

**Hit Points:** Adult: 1D4x1,000 + P.E. attribute number.

Hatchling: 1D4x100 + P.E. attribute number.

**S.D.C.:** Adult: 4D6x100.

Hatchling: 4D6x10 plus 3D6 per level of experience.

**P.P.E.:** Adult: 2D4x100; Hatchling: 2D4x10 +10 per level of experience.

**Horror Factor:** Adult: 15. Hatchling: 10.

**R.C.C. Skills (Palladium):** Basic and Advanced Math 98%, literate in Dragonese/Elven 98% and three other languages of choice, plus speaks five additional languages at 98%.

Other skills include Lore: Demons & Monsters (+20%), Lore: Faerie Folk (+10%), Gemology (+25%), Sculpting & Whittling (ice; +15%), as well as a total of 12 selections from the following skill categories: Communications, Espionage, Military, Physical (other than hand to hand combat skills), Rogue, Scholar/Technical, Wilderness and Weapon Proficiencies. Skill proficiency depends on the level of experience (skill level should be the same as level of magic). Include I.Q. bonus (if any) to all skills.

**Level of Experience:** Adult is 1D6+6.

Hatchlings start with the Language and Basic Math skills at 96% proficiency. Domestic skills, Advanced Math and all other skills start at first level proficiency.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 200 feet (61 m), excellent color vision, breathe without air/underwater indefinitely, see the invisible, the dragon is invisible while underwater at a distance of more than 15 feet (4.6 m), Bio-Regenerates 1D4x10 M.D. per minute, impervious to cold (does no damage), metamorphosis at will (duration 4 hours per level of experience; 2 hours for hatchlings), teleport self 64%, dimensional teleport 24% +4% per level of experience, and all other dimensional powers, spells and knowledge common to most 'true' dragons.

**Aspect of Ice (special):** Conducting the elemental powers of water through its body, a Winterserpent can temporarily become a creature of living ice. While in this form, the dragon's Armor Rating (A.R.) increases by two points; rising to 16 for adults and 12 for hatchlings. Lasts 2D6+2 minutes, and can only be performed once every eight hours. While in Ice Form, the Winterserpent is buoyant and unable to swim beneath the surface of the water.

**Icewater Breath Attack (special):** The Winterserpent's breath 'weapon' is actually a spray of water that freezes on contact. The dragon can leave a trail of slick ice behind it, encrust ships and buildings, or distract opponents with fro-

zen armor and impending hypothermia. Affects one specific humanoid target (two if human-sized or smaller and standing within 4 feet/1.2 meters of each other). Ships whose sails are iced-over (freezing each sail counts as one attack), see their top speed cut by 50%, while enemies in armor receive an additional -10% penalty to move, swim and Prowl. Enemies not immune to the cold or not wearing waterproof clothing also have to roll to save vs magic or suffer the effects of magical hypothermia; -20% on all skills, reduce Spd by half, -1 melee attack and -2 on all combat rolls for 2D4 melee rounds.

**Form of the Bear (special):** At will, Winterserpents can take on the appearance and size of either an Ice Bearman, traditional Bearman (with streaks of gray and white in its fur), an ordinary looking white fur bear (polar bear), or a giant northern white bear (10-12 feet/3 to 3.6 m tall and 20-25 feet/6-7.6 m long). They use the Bearman form to walk amongst their chosen people – or other humanoids – and assume the appearance of a giant bear to travel the surface of the land, battle supernatural creatures and occasionally hibernate. Can assume bear or Ice Bearman form for four hours per level of experience, two for hatchlings.

**Vulnerabilities and Weaknesses:** Normal fire does its usual damage, while magic fire does double damage. Winterserpents are not physically injured by high temperatures, but become uncomfortable and distracted at any temperature above 50 degrees Fahrenheit (10 C). Under these conditions they are -5% on all skills, -1 on Perception Rolls, -1 on initiative, and -1 to strike.

**Bonuses (in addition to attribute bonuses):** **Adult:** +1 on all Perception Rolls, +3 on Perception Rolls involving treasure, magic, dragons, Ice Bearmen, and heat and cold, +4 on initiative, +3 to strike, +3 to parry and dodge, +4 to pull punch, +4 to roll with impact, +6 to save vs Horror Factor, and +4 on all other saving throws.

**Hatchling:** +1 on Perception Rolls, +2 on initiative, +1 to strike, +2 to parry and dodge, +2 to pull punch, +2 to roll with impact, +4 to save vs Horror Factor, and +2 on all other saving throws.

**Attacks per Melee:** **Adult:** Seven physical attacks per melee, or four icewater breath and three physical, or two by magic. Prefer to fight using magic.

**Hatchling:** Four physical, or two physical and two by icewater breath, or four via magic only.

**Damage:** Varies with Supernatural P.S. The prehensile tail can be used to strike at its enemies like a whip. The tail does the same damage as a punch +2D6 additional points of damage. Or the dragon may use its breath, magic, or a weapon.

**Magic (Adults and NPC hatchlings over 100 years old):** Adult Winterserpents of 8th level or higher are likely to know all *Water Elemental magic*, all spell magic levels 1-5, plus 2D6 of choice from levels 6-10; often favoring ice spells. Dragons 14th level or higher know all *Water Elemental magic*, all spell magic levels 1-8 plus 3D4 additional higher spells. Winterserpents 20th level or higher will know all *Water Elemental magic*, all spells 1-12 plus 1D4 higher level spells!

**Magic Knowledge of Hatchlings:** Full understanding of magic, knows all *Water Elemental magic* levels 1-3, and can learn spells with the same ease and quickness of a first level wizard. By 2nd level, the typical hatchling dragon will have learned 2D4 spells from levels 1-3, in addition to its innate Water El-

emental magic. The hatchling can also intuitively use all types of magic devices, can read magic, use scrolls, and recognize magic circles and enchantment (the latter is at 40% +5% per level of experience). The hatchling can cast a maximum of two spells per level of experience.

**Psionics:** Adult: I.S.P. 2D6x10 + M.E. attribute number. An adult Winterserpent has all Sensitive and Physical psi-powers!

Hatchling: Minor Psychic. The player (or G.M.) can select a total of four psychic powers from either the Sensitive or Physical categories. Select an additional power from that psionic category at levels 3, 7, and 12. I.S.P.: 1D4x10 + M.E. attribute number.

**Habitat:** Tends to live alone in snow-capped mountains and coastlines with easy access to water, often making a lair underwater, sometimes below sea ice. Journeys south are usually temporary, but dragons in search of solitude might take refuge atop cold, tall mountains or amongst glaciers. Much more likely to go exploring during winter months.

**Average Life Span:** 6,000 years, but some have lived as long as 10,000.

**Enemies:** Winterserpents have few threats in their natural environment and see themselves as above the petty rivalries of humanoids. Their outlook is often relative to their followers; if the Ice Bearman tribe(s) that worship them are at odds with Wolfen, Coyles or other intelligent species, the Winterserpent will likely develop a prejudice against them. If it is the Wolfen who worship them, they will dislike humans, etc.

**Allies:** Has an affinity for Frost Giants, Ice Pixies, Wolfen, Kanoran and Bearmen, particularly Ice Bearmen, who worship Winterserpents and Ice Dragons like gods.

### Rifts® Winterserpent Adjusted Stats

Winterserpents that have made their way to Rifts Earth are most likely to be encountered in Canada, the northern half of the old United States, Siberia or Antarctica.

**R.C.C. Skills:** Basic and Advanced Math 98%, literate in Dragonese/Elven 98% and four other languages of choice, plus speaks six additional languages at 98%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 90%, Lore: Faerie Folk 60%, Basic Electronics 98% and Computer Operation 98%, as well as a total of 14 selections from the skill categories of Communications, Physical (other than combat skills), Pilot, Pilot Related (3 skills), Rogue, Science, Technical and Weapon Proficiencies.

**M.D.C.:** Adult: 1D6x1000+150. Hatchling: 1D4x100 +P.E. attribute number.

**Armor Rating:** A Mega-Damage creature on Rifts Earth; impervious to normal weapons. Magic, psionics, and Mega-Damage weapons have full effect.

**Natural Abilities of Note:** Impervious to fire and cold (no damage even from M.D. attacks), see the invisible, naturally invisible while underwater, Bio-Regenerate 1D4x10 M.D. points every five minutes, Form of the Bear, Aspect of Ice (provides an additional 2D6x10 M.D. when active) and Icewater Breath (see Natural Abilities, above).

# TOO BIG TO FAIL

## An Adventure for the Palladium Fantasy RPG®

By Michael Osborne

*Too Big to Fail* is a complete adventure that can be played on its own or as part of a campaign. All of the characters are Giants, and all of the equipment and weapons are giant-sized, with the extra damage already factored in. I wanted to create a Giant adventure because most adventures are not suitable for them and Giants can make for interesting, diverse and exciting characters, not just monsters to slay. Feel free to use some or all of the optional Giant player characters below, or make your own. Non-Giant characters can also go on this adventure, but they won't be able to use most of the armor and weapons found. It takes place in the Yin-Sloth Jungles, but can be moved anywhere with minimal effort. Monsters can be added or removed to make it challenging for any player group. The Game Master should read the adventure carefully, pre-roll the random encounters and check encounters in the various rooms to match the players' level and number. There are a total of 56 Trolls and 18 Troll Mummies as per the Create Mummy Ritual; any number of Entities can be added.

## Optional Giant Player Characters

### Thorn – the Hunter

Thorn the Hunter was born in a small, wilderness goat-herding community. There he learned to be a hunter/trapper and was a productive member of his village. He spent most of his time trading with the Wolfen Empire and has a good relationship with them. He is upset with the hostile and murderous treatment that his people and the Wolfen suffer at the hands of the humans. He felt he had a greater purpose than butchering and skinning goats and left home for the Yin-Sloth Jungles to see for himself what else the world had to offer. Thorn has just arrived at the City of Cyclone to look for adventure.

**Name:** Thorn.

**True Name:** Algo'valdr Thornegamar.

**Race:** Algor.

**O.C.C.:** Woodsman.

**Alignment:** Unprincipled.

**Hit Points:** 14. **S.D.C.:** 68.



**Attributes:** I.Q. 11, M.E. 8, M.A. 10, P.S. 22, P.P. 20, P.E. 14, P.B. 10, Spd 9.

**Horror Factor:** 10

**P.P.E.:** 17. **I.S.P.:** 16.

**Age:** 27. **Life Span:** 300-400 years.

**Sex:** Male. **Height:** 19 feet (5.8 m). **Weight:** 1,000 pounds (450 kg).

**Land of Origin:** The Great Northern Wilderness.

**Environment:** Little farm community.

**Social Background:** Merchant.

**Racial Hostilities:** Humans.

**Disposition:** Arrogant, feels superior; may underestimate others. He is a skilled and talented hunter who can strip down an animal to its most useful parts. The skin (leather/fur), meat (food), bones (tools) and tendons (thread/stings) all get separated and preserved for use later. He respects people who have useful skills such as Druids and Rangers, but has disdain for those he considers useless, like most nobles and city-dwelling humans.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Language: Giantese 98%, Language: Wolfen 50%, Skin & Prepare Animal Hides 50%, Track & Trap Animals 45/55%, Preserve Food 40%, Cook 40%, Land Navigation 45%, Wilderness Survival 45%, Camouflage 30%, Swim 50%, W.P. Knife, W.P. Archery, Hand to Hand: Expert.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Leather Working 40%, Tailor 25%.

**Secondary Skills:** Horsemanship: Exotic 30/20%, Literacy: Wolfen 30%, Prowl 25%, W.P. Axe.

**Insanity:** None.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision: 60 feet (18.3 m), Impervious to non-magic and magic cold, Frost Breath: Range 30 feet (9.1 m) and 4D6 damage.

**Psionics:** Bio-Regenerate, Suppress Fear.

**Attribute Bonus:** Applied.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 2

**Bonuses:** +1 on initiative, +4 to pull punch, +3 to roll with fall or impact, +1 to strike with Frost Breath. +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +5 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to save vs poison.

**Description:** He is a tall, slim man with pale blue skin, dark blue eyes and silver hair, cut short. He has good muscle tone and a scruffy, mountain-man look to him.

**Equipment:** Standard per O.C.C., plus cooking gear, sewing kit, leather working kit and spices necessary for preserving food.

**Gold:** 150

**Armor & Weapons:** Studded Leather armor (A.R.: 13, S.D.C.: 38), crossbow (3D6 damage), short bow (2D6 damage), a quiver with 24 arrows, knife (2D6 damage) and a two-headed axe (3D6 damage).

**Fighting Style:** He will strike first with his crossbow/short bow and then engage with his axe. He acts as both a marksman and a warrior.

**Group Function:** He is the expert hunter and trapper. He makes sure there is enough fresh and preserved food for the group's travels. He makes leather goods and helps provide properly cured bone, leather and tendons to other craftsman to make necessary goods for their use or sale.

## Atola – the Archaeologist

Atola was born in the city of Cyclone and was trained as an archaeologist and a Diabolist. She studied Diabolism because most Giants don't and she wants to expand her people's understanding of that magic. She is an adventurous archaeologist at heart, who would rather be exploring an ancient tomb or dwarven complex than reading dusty books in a library. She plans on writing an archaeology book and hopes to be respected in both the archeological and magical community.

**Name:** Atola.

**True Name:** Avaotaola Zwin.

**Race:** Cyclops.

**O.C.C.:** Diabolist.

**Alignment:** Unprincipled.

**Hit Points:** 20. **S.D.C.:** 64.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 14, M.E. 10, M.A. 17, P.S. 21, P.P. 17, P.E. 20, P.B. 10, Spd 25.

**Horror Factor:** 12

**P.P.E.:** 139. **I.S.P.:** 18.

**Age:** 35. **Life Span:** 600-1,000.

**Sex:** Female. **Height:** 18 feet (5.5 m). **Weight:** 800 pounds (360 kg).

**Land of Origin:** Yin-Sloth Jungles.

**Environment:** City of Cyclone.

**Social Background:** Scholarly.

**Racial Hostilities:** Elves.

**Disposition:** Gung-ho, guts and glory type who sees herself as a hero; likes combat and challenges. She loves traveling and getting her hands dirty uncovering ancient secrets. She wants to uncover ancient magic left over from the Age of Chaos, Battle of the Gods, the Age of a Thousand Magicks or the Elf-Dwarf War, then write about it.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Art 45%, Cryptography 35%, Language: Giantese 98%, Language: Dwarven 60%, Language: Elven 60%, Language: Human Western 60%, Literacy: Elven 98%, Literacy: Dwarven 50%, Literacy: Human Western 50%, Lore: Geomancy & Ley Lines 40%, Mathematics: Basic 70%, Sculpting & Whittling 50%, W.P. Archery, Hand to Hand: Expert.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Archaeology 30%, Horsemanship: Exotic 30/20%, Locate Secret Compartments 25%, Mathematics: Advanced 55%, Writing 35%.

**Secondary Skills:** Athletics (General), Running, W.P.: Forked Weapons, W.P.: Targeting/Missile Weapons.

**Insanity:** None.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m), Impervious to non-magic and magic lightning and electricity, Resistant to other forms of energy (half damage).

**Psionics:** Sense Magic, Total Recall.

**Attribute Bonus:** Trust/Intimidate: 45%.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 2.

**Bonuses:** +6 to damage, +1 on initiative, +1 to dodge, +1 to parry, +4 to pull punch, +8 to roll with fall or impact, +1 to strike. +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +9 to save vs Horror Factor, +4 to save vs magic, +4 to save vs poison, +10% to save vs coma/death.

**Description:** An attractive, athletic, olive-skinned, slender woman with one eye. She has long, dark hair and auburn eye-color.

**Equipment:** Standard for O.C.C.

**Gold:** 130

**Armor & Weapons:** Soft Leather armor (A.R.: 10, S.D.C. 20), Short Bow (2D6 damage), Trident (3D6+2 damage).

**Knowledge & Abilities:** 1. Power Words. 2. Literacy: Runes 88%. 3. Mystic Symbolology. 4. Recognize & Understand Magic Circles: 22% +10% to recognize & understand the function and operation of protection circles. 5. Use Magic Circles: 30% +10 to use protection circles. 6. Identify Energized Wards: 25%. 7. Recognize Enchantment: 20%. 8. Recognize Magic: 20% +20 if magic symbols or runes are involved. 9. Magic bonuses: Already applied. 10. P.P.E.: +2D6 P.P.E. per level. 11. Read Scrolls. Standard per O.C.C.

**Fighting Style:** She will first strike with her bow and enter hand to hand combat if necessary. She is a support marksman who can assist the front-line warriors.

**Group Function:** She is the group's primary interpreter. Atola can assist in making arrows and carving decorative patterns in wood or bone shafts and handles. She is also the party's chronicler. She enjoys writing and illustrating books about their adventures and architectural books of castles and dungeons they have visited. She is also a skilled archer and talented fighter who is not afraid to get her hands dirty or bloody.

## Kate – the Smith

Kate is the daughter of a tribal Jotan Chief from the mountains in the Eastern Territories. As a child, she was sent to a religious commune dedicated to Belimar. It was there she learned the art of Weaponsmithing. She hated living there because she realized her father sent her away so his youngest son would be trained to take over the clan when he died. She was the eldest daughter and thought she should have been given the opportunity to run the clan. She learned of her father's death when an assassin sent by her brother tried to kill her at the retreat. Her brother murdered their father, took over the clan and tried to kill her. She fled to the City of Cyclone to escape any other assassins her brother may send after her.

**Name:** Kate.

**True Name:** Zenovbia Kaeitos.

**Race:** Jotan.

**O.C.C.:** Blacksmith.

**Alignment:** Scrupulous.

**Hit Points:** 21. **S.D.C.:** 85.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 11, M.E. 13, M.A. 9, P.S. 27, P.P. 18, P.E. 21, P.B. 18, Spd 22.

**Horror Factor:** 12

**P.P.E.:** 40. **I.S.P.:** 19.

**Age:** 29. **Life Span:** 300-500.

**Sex:** Female. **Height:** 20 feet (6.1 m). **Weight:** 1,500 pounds (675 kg).

**Land of Origin:** Eastern Territories.

**Environment:** Religious Community.

**Social Background:** Noble.

**Racial Hostilities:** Suspicious of everybody.

**Disposition:** Nice gal, friendly, courteous and hospitable. Having grown up in a noble family and in a religious commune, she is a courteous and polite woman, when not in combat. She is not personally charming but polite just the same, especially for a Giant.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Language: Giantese 98%, Language: Dwarven 55%, Language: Gobblely 55%, Mathematics: Basic 50%,

Athletics (General), Body Building, Recognize Weapon Quality 45%, Field Armorer 50%, Pick Locks 35%, Metalworking 45%, W.P. Blunt, Hand to Hand: Expert.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Gemology 35%, Literacy: Dwarven 30%, Salvage 45%.

**Secondary Skills:** Horsemanship: Exotic 30/20%, Military Etiquette 35%, Recycle 30%, W.P. Paired Weapons.

**Insanity:** None.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 40 feet (12.2 m), Resistant to non-magic heat and fire (half damage).

**Psionics:** Telekinetic Leap, Telekinetic Lift.

**Attribute Bonus:** Charm/Impress: 40%.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 2.

**Bonuses:** +12 to damage, +1 on initiative, +2 to dodge, +2 to parry, +6 to pull punch, +5 to roll with fall or impact, +2 to strike. +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +6 to save vs Horror Factor, +3 to save vs magic, +4 to save vs poison, +12% to save vs coma/death.

**Description:** She is a strong woman who has the physique of an Olympic body builder. She has bronze skin, brown eyes and long, shaggy brown hair. She is also a stunningly beautiful woman who has an air of confidence.

**Equipment:** Standard per O.C.C.

**Gold:** 350

**Armor & Weapons:** Studded Leather armor (A.R.: 13, S.D.C.: 38) and Soft Leather (A.R.: 10, S.D.C.: 20), a pair of small, heavy hammers (3D6 damage each), two matching War Hammers (4D4 damage each), a small knife (2D4 damage).

**Fighting Style:** She is a fierce warrior who engages the enemy with her two warhammers. She likes fighting up close and personal and does not like using missile weapons.

**Group Function:** She is a front-line soldier who enjoys combat. She strips enemies of any metal objects and determines if they are suitable to be re-forged into giant-sized weapons and armor. Since iron ore can be difficult to come by, she is skilled at Recycling/Salvaging metal objects, sorting and re-forging them.

## Sir Regar – the Knight

Regar was born in the City of Freedara in the Yin-Sloth Jungles, kidnapped by human slavers and sold to a noble in the Western Empire. He was sent to an Order of Knights in the Old Kingdom and started training as a palladin. Upon being knighted he was sent back home to Freedara. He has traveled to Cyclone to put his training to good use. Regar wants to start an order of Giant Knights; the *Knights Gigante*.

**Name:** Sir Regar.

**True Name:** Wodguarr.

**Race:** Gigante.

**O.C.C.:** Palladin of Thoth.

**Alignment:** Unprincipled.

**Hit Points:** 26. **S.D.C.:** 82.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 11, M.E. 5, M.A. 9, P.S. 29, P.P. 15, P.E. 26, P.B. 7, Spd 17.

**Horror Factor:** 13

**P.P.E.:** 76. **I.S.P.:** 14.

**Age:** 29. **Life Span:** 150-400.

**Sex:** Male. **Height:** 20 feet (6.1 m). **Weight:** 1,800 pounds (810 kg).



**Land of Origin:** Yin-Sloth Jungles.

**Environment:** Freedara.

**Social Background:** Warrior Caste.

**Racial Hostilities:** Ratlings.

**Disposition:** Parental. He takes his responsibilities as a knight seriously. Regar follows the Code of Chivalry when dealing with Giants, knights and his friends only; all others are simply not significant enough for the code to apply. He always treats Giant women with respect regardless of their social standing. He sees Dwarves, Elves and Humans as the true monster races.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Area Knowledge: Old Kingdom 40%, Legal Knowledge 35%, Horsemanship: Palladin 45/40%, Land Navigation 30%, Language: Giantese 98%, Language: Human Eastern 55%, Literacy: Human Eastern 50%, Mathematics: Basic 60%, W.P. Knife, W.P. Lance, W.P. Paired Weapons, W.P. Shield, W.P. Sword, Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

**Family Skills:** Detect Ambush 40%, Detect Concealment 35%, Intelligence 42%.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** First Aid 30%, History: The Battle of the Gods 40%, Horsemanship: Exotic 35/25%, Military Etiquette 45%, Public Speaking 40%, Recognize Weapon Quality 35%, Sign Language 35%.

**Secondary Skills:** Boxing, Wilderness Survival 30%, Wrestling, W.P. Archery.

**Insanity:** None. Most Gigantes think he is insane because of his reserved & good nature.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision: 70 feet (21.3 m), Instinctive Swimmers 60%.

**Mutations:** Additional Eye, Claws add +1D6 to punch damage, Large Fangs, 3D6 bite damage, Leather Wings, Speed 100.

**Psonics:** Intuitive Combat, Mind Block.

**Attribute Bonus:** Applied.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 3. Body Block/Tackle: 3D6 damage, Crush Squeeze: 3D6 damage, Knockout on a Natural 20 for 1D4 melee rounds, Pin/Incapacitate: Natural 18, 19 or 20.

**Bonuses:** +14 to damage, +5 on initiative, +1 to dodge, +2 to parry, +6 to pull punch, +6 to roll with fall or impact. +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +8 to save vs Horror Factor, +6 to save vs magic, +7 to save vs poison, +22% to save vs coma/death.

**Description:** A wall of muscle. He is broad-chested, with over-muscled arms and legs. He has three eyes, two placed normally and one in his forehead, large fangs and leather wings. He has brown hair and eyes.

**Equipment:** Standard as per O.C.C.

**Gold:** 100

**Armor & Weapons:** Scale Mail (A.R.: 15, S.D.C.: 75), small shield with his crest painted on, lance, 3D6+2 damage, Dwarven quality long sword (3D6+2 damage) and matching dagger (2D6 damage, +2 to parry), Flamberge (4D6 damage) and a crossbow (3D6 damage).

**Paladin Training and Masteries:** All as per O.C.C.

**Fighting Style:** He will engage in melee against ground forces, while using his lance or crossbow when fighting in the air.

**Group Function:** Regar walks ahead of the party to watch for ambushes and traps. He will always take the lead whenever decisive action needs to be taken.

## Austhelm – the Healer

Austhelm was born in a small village near Mt. Nimro. He volunteered for a mission to explore the Yin-Sloth jungles for potential allies and enemies as well as to determine the best location for an invasion. It was thought that a shaman would not be easily identified as a spy. He traveled to the City of Cyclone to locate adventuring allies and start his quest.

**Name:** Austhelm.

**True Name:** Gasthelm Auser.

**Race:** Nimro.

**O.C.C.:** Shaman.

**Alignment:** Miscreant.

**Hit Points:** 20. **S.D.C.:** 50.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 10, M.E. 22, M.A. 8, P.S. 22, P.P. 16, P.E. 20, P.B. 11, Spd 16.

**Horror Factor:** 11

**P.P.E.:** 114. **I.S.P.:** 32.

**Age:** 40. **Life Span:** 300-500.

**Sex:** Male. **Height:** 18 feet (5.5 m). **Weight:** 1,000 pounds (450 kg).

**Land of Origin:** Mount Nimro.

**Environment:** Small Tribe.

**Social Background:** Craftsman.

**Racial Hostilities:** Human.

**Disposition:** Schemer and a gambler who likes to take chances. Traveling to Yin-Sloth as a spy was the ultimate gamble he hopes will pay off.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Sing 50%, Dance 45%, Language: Giantese 98%, Language: Human-Southern 60%, Language: Faerie 60%, Wilderness Survival 40%, Holistic Medicine 40/30%, Dowsing 30%, Recognize Weapon Quality 30%, Sign Language 30%, W.P. Spear, Hand to Hand: Basic.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Carpentry 40%, Fashion Tools & Weapons 45%, Rope Works 40%, Sculpting & Whittling (Professional) 50%, Surgery 30/20%.

**Secondary Skills:** Biology 30%, Brewing 35/40%, Botany 25%, Literacy: Human-Southern 40%, Mathematics: Basic 45%.

**Insanity:** None.

**Natural Abilities:** Fire Breath: Range 40 feet (12.2 m) 4D6 damage, Nightvision: 40 feet (12.2 m), impervious to non-magic and magic fire and resistant to all other forms of energy such as electricity, cold and energy bolts (half damage).

**Psonics:** Attack Disease, Psychic Diagnosis.

**Attribute Bonus:** Applied.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 2.

**Bonuses:** +7 to damage, +1 on initiative, +1 to dodge, +1 to parry, +4 to pull punch, +3 to roll with fall or impact, +1 to strike. +3 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +9 to save vs Horror Factor (+18 during ceremonies and chants), +1 to save vs illusions, +5 to save vs insanity, +3 to save vs magic, +6 to save vs poison, +5 to save vs possession, +4 to save vs psionic attack, +10% to save vs coma/death.

**Description:** Austhelm is a strong man with red skin, long, red-brown hair and yellow eyes. He is quiet and observant, especially of nature.

**Equipment:** As per O.C.C. plus the tools necessary to craft bone, stone and wood weapons and armor, especially arrows. A surgical kit including: bandages, glass vials, grinding tools for medicinal herbs, scalpels, clamps, arrow spoons, etc.

**Gold:** 50

**Armor & Weapons:** Soft Leather armor (A.R.: 10, S.D.C.: 20), Dagger (2D6 damage), Long Spear (3D6 damage).

**Abilities & Bonuses:** 1. Chants. 2. Sense Mystical Power: Sense Ley Lines, Sense Mystical Beings: 25% & Sense Confined Mystic Power. 3. Ceremony of the Shaman: Heal Ceremonial Participants, Ceremony to Invest Power, Ceremonial Chants. 4. P.P.E.: +2D6 per level. 5. O.C.C. Bonuses: Already applied. All as per *Adventures on the High Seas*, pages 38-42.

**Magic Chants:** Chant of Blessing, Chant of Divination, Chant of Dreaming, Chant of Exorcism, Chant of Healing and Chant of Lightning Fist (Mysteries of Magic™, Book One: The Heart of Magic™, page 91).

**Fighting Style:** Before combat he will perform a Chant of Blessing, then engage the enemy with either his spear or Lightning Fist depending on the nature of the enemy. He operates like a front-line warrior during combat and a healer when the battle is over.

**Group Function:** Austhelm is a healer and spiritual guide for his companions. Should any of his companions have a moral, personal or spiritual dilemma, they go to him for guidance. He is also a skilled craftsman, building bone, stone and wood weapons and armor. He specializes in creating arrows and assists the blacksmith in crafting weapons by making wooden shafts and bone handles for steel blades and arrowheads crafted by the blacksmith. Austhelm wants to learn more chants, especially lightning chants.

## Anya – the Courtesan

Not everyone who becomes an adventurer comes from a noble background; some come from humble origins, some from tragic ones. Anya grew up as an orphan in the slums of Cyclone. As a child she scavenged for food, clothes and shelter. When she came of age she found a wizard who would teach her magic, but it was expensive. She trolled the streets, alleys and taverns as a prostitute to pay him for her education and to support herself. As long as her customers had gold or a spell to trade she did not turn anyone away. When her training was over she was a Forsaken Mage. Today, Anya is a courtesan, working out of taverns, but is looking to adventure so she can forge her own destiny and start a new life. She is searching for spell knowledge and maybe a real romance with someone who treats her with love and respect.

**Name:** Anya.

**True Name:** Tat' Anya Hellborn.

**Race:** Titan.

**O.C.C.:** Forsaken Mage.

**Alignment:** Unprincipled.

**Hit Points:** 20. **S.D.C.:** 90.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 19, M.E. 6, M.A. 22, P.S. 20, P.P. 19, P.E. 20, P.B. 26, Spd 17.

**Horror Factor:** 12

**P.P.E.:** 180. **I.S.P.:** 16.

**Age:** 39. **Life Span:** 1,000-1,800.

**Sex:** Female. **Height:** 14 feet (4.3 m). **Weight:** 800 pounds (360 kg).

**Land of Origin:** Yin-Sloth Jungles.

**Environment:** City of Cyclone.

**Social Background:** Scavenger.

**Racial Hostilities:** None.

**Disposition:** Hot-head, quick-tempered, emotional, but nice. She is jaded after many years of prostitution, but has a kind heart.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Horsemanship: General 50/35%, Language: Gintese 95%, Language: Elven 57%, Literacy: Elven 43%, Lore: Magic 40%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 40%, Mathematics: Basic 60%, W.P. Whip, Hand to Hand: Expert.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Barter 35%, Performance 40%, Research 60%, Wardrobe & Grooming 65%.

**Secondary Skills:** Aerobic Athletics, Appraise Goods 35%, Seduction 32%, Streetwise 25%.

**Insanity:** None.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision: 90 feet (27.4 m), Bio-Regenerate: 4D6 S.D.C. per minute, Dimensional Teleport: 45% success ratio, Impervious to Vampire Bite, See the Invisible, Turn 6D6 Dead: 80% success ratio.

**Psionics:** Commune with Spirits, Empathy.

**Attribute Bonuses:** Charm/Impress: 80%, Trust/Intimidate: 70%.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 3.

**Bonuses:** +5 to damage, +2 to kicking damage, +3 on initiative, +1 to disarm, +2 to dodge, +2 to parry, +7 to pull punch, +3 to roll with fall or impact, +2 to strike. Sense of Balance 30%. +10% to save vs coma/death, +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs drugs, +11 to save vs Horror Factor, +4 to save vs magic, +4 to save vs poison, +1 to save vs possession.

**Description:** She has a voluptuous, hourglass figure, with long, strawberry blond hair, blue eyes, a deep tan, and wears make-up.

**Equipment:** Standard per O.C.C. plus silken courtesan work clothes, perfume and makeup.

**Gold:** 70

**Armor & Weapons:** Soft Leather armor (A.R.: 10, S.D.C.: 20), a folding straight razor (3D4 damage, for defense and personal grooming) and a bull whip (3D6 damage).

**O.C.C. Abilities and Features:** As per *Mysteries of Magic™, Book One: The Heart of Magic™*, pages 64-69.

**Magic:** Level One: (Demon) Demon Roar, Friend of the Serpent. (Invocation) Decipher Magic, Globe of Daylight, See Aura, Thunderclap. (Necromancy) Bone & Joint Bonding.

Level Two: (Demon) Temptation. (Invocation) Cleanse. (Necromancy) Fragile Bone to Wood.

Level Three: (Demon) Baal-Rog's Fire Whip, Eyes of the Magot.

**Fighting Style:** Depending on who they are fighting, Anya will either use her weapons or her magic.

**Group Function:** Anya is familiar with the criminal underground. She is able to get information from people and go places a Palladin cannot. If the party needs to buy or sell contraband she can locate the right people and negotiate a good price. She is a charmer who is as comfortable chatting with a king as she is with a beggar.

## The False Rune Forge

**Hook:** The players are relaxing at their favorite watering hole when a small delegation of strange looking people approach. They are Gigantes with jaguar heads, bearing clothing and weapons very similar to the Tezcats. The leader of the delegation steps up and addresses the players.

**Line:** “I am Chief Donaga of the Jaguar Head Tribe. Our tribe is located north of the Great Bog, near the mountains. We are under siege by feral Trolls. They raid our villages at night and kill our people. We would be able to defeat them ourselves but they carry weapons of metal that are possessed with the blackest of magic.” He pauses to wipe the sweat from his brow.

**Sinker:** “Come to our village and investigate these creatures. We do not have gold but we do have our friendship and you can keep anything you take from the Trolls.” He stops and waits for the players’ response. If the players accept, the Chief will be very happy and escort the players to his tribal home. The trip will be uneventful but will give the players the opportunity to learn more about this unusual tribe of Gigantes.

If asked about their tribal history or culture, the Gigantes will explain how many years ago they had no real concept of a tribe and never worked together. They found a temple to a Jaguar god and knew they were destined to build a home there. The most successful tribe in the jungle was the Tezcat, so they patterned their new tribe in a similar fashion and built a village and several small forts. They are now the strongest tribe in the region, making high-quality stone weapons and bone armor. Now, several smaller, rival tribes have banded together to halt their growth. The Jaguar warriors train for war every day and frequently clash with their gathering enemies, but the new Trolls are an unknown force that threatens the balance of power and the survival of the entire tribe.

## The Village of the Jaguar Head Tribe

This village is what one might expect from the Tezcat, but not Gigantes. They use jungle armor and wield stone weapons. Villagers can be seen making stone tools and pottery. Most of the buildings are made from wood but important buildings are carved from stone. All of the villagers have the heads of great cats, most of them jaguars. Bamboo pickets surround the village and all warriors are on high alert.

There are no ‘shops’ in the village, but there is a stone plaza where craftsmen make weapons, armor, pottery, clothing and whatever else the tribe needs. They trade their goods with each other and will be happy to trade with the players. They are as talented as Tezcat with stone and bone. Any stone/bone weapons or armor are considered Tezcat/Jotan quality. They can also make leather armor for the players but that will take a while. The tribal shamans are also well versed in creating magic amulets as per the spell.

After they stop to resupply, the players will be expected to track down the Trolls. It is hard to get an accurate description of them because they always attack at night, wear armor and conduct lightning-fast raids. They are utterly ruthless and seem to enjoy killing. If the players visit nearby tribes they will find that other jungle dwellers in the region have been attacked by these Trolls as well. They strike at random and always take captives. The Trolls’ armor and weapons are magic; carved with enchanted symbols.

The other native tribes such as the Tezcat, Headhunters and Pygmies are all hostile to the Gigantes but will be open to talking to the players once they know they are here to fight the Trolls. If asked about the Gigantes they will be told that they have been trouble ever since they moved in. The Gigantes used to raid other tribes, eating their victims and stealing supplies. It took the cooperation of all the tribes to keep the Giants in check. The other tribes thought the Trolls were a blessing at first because they put

the Gigantes on the defensive, keeping them from attacking their neighbors. Unfortunately, the Trolls started to raid everyone and the combined might of every tribe in the region cannot stop them. Once the Trolls are gone the other tribes suspect the Giants will start attacking them again.

If the players choose to track down the Trolls, they will be easy to find. The Trolls make no attempt to cover their tracks. Following the Trolls’ trail leads to a mountain range and eventually, a massive, rubble-strewn cave entrance. The mouth of the cave is thirty feet tall (9.1 m) and fifteen feet (4.6 m) wide. There has been no attempt to camouflage the cave and there is no light source inside. Examining the exterior of the cave will show there are no traps set. There is a stable that was apparently built to care for workhorses and store wagons. Inspection of the stable will show the ground is covered with dried blood and entrails. The animals apparently struggled and were eaten alive. The wagons, built for giant-sized people, are in good repair.

The entrance looks as if the cave is a recent, natural formation. Entering the cave, the players will see many giant-sized footprints going in and out. The cave interior is clearly a natural formation with no monsters or traps. In the back of the cave is a large hallway, obviously carved by an intelligent species. From this point out, all the rooms and hallways are dark and clearly carved for use by Giants.

## The Cave Interior

**1) Cave Entrance:** This cave has been closed for centuries. Only recently has the erosion been enough to reveal the entrance. There are no signs of animal marks inside the cave but there are Troll footprints going in and out. The cave leads into a finished hallway.

**2) Storeroom:** This is a storeroom for the cavern complex. This room contained food, weapons and general supplies for the expedition. Most of the boxes, crates, bottles and pottery have been smashed. All the junk has been placed in several piles about the room. Several Tectonic Entities inhabit this area. They take a variety of forms, such as metal scrap, broken pottery, humanoid bones and wood. How many Entities are in this room is up to the Game Master. There are six possessed Trolls, sleeping, and two mummy guards. The mummies will attack the players if they enter the room. Should any significant amount of noise be made the Trolls will wake up and attack the players also.

Each Tectonic Entity has possessed a pile of junk. They will remain still until the players either search the piles, walk into the center of the room or attack the Entities. They will fight until their scrap bodies have been destroyed and then try to flee. Once more junk bodies can be made they will return to the room if possible. If the spirits can be banished without destroying the bodies they will collapse into a mix of generic traveling gear, some human-sized and some giant-sized.

In the pile are a variety of humanoid bones that have been clearly butchered and chewed on. In a corner of the room is a medicine crate filled with giant-sized doses of All-Purpose Remedy (Tonic) 10 vials, Healing Potions 10 vials, Negate Poison 10 vials, Truth Serum 10 vials, a stack of 20 magic bandages and 10 vials of Rodoffrin. All vials are labeled in Human-Western.

**3) Journal Room:** When the players open this door, they will be immediately attacked by its occupants: six possessed Trolls and two mummies. Dried blood covers this room.

Every piece of furniture is smashed just like in the storage room. If the Trolls are no match for the players, feel free to add Tectonic Entities in the debris to keep the room challenging, otherwise there are no other Entities in the room. Searching the room will uncover 1,000 gold and a **Red Journal**. It is warded with burning pain and death. The journal was owned by the chief Alchemist. Roll 1D10 to determine the number of Trolls.

**4) Intact Room:** This room is neat, clean and the beds are made. There are six Trolls, sleeping, and two mummies. The mummies will attack if the players enter the room. If the Trolls wake they will attack the players. There are poltergeists in the room as well. They will play tricks like tying boot laces together, loosening belts and undoing buckles. They may also steal spell books or weapons if they can get away with it. If they are detected they will fight to defend their room until half are destroyed, then the others will flee. Searching this room will reveal 500 gold. Roll 2D4 to determine the number of Entities.

**5) Destroyed Room:** Smashed debris covers this room. There are six Trolls and two mummies inside. They are awake and will attack the players upon entry. There is also a Possessing Entity in the room. It will attack the players when they walk in the door. Searching the room will uncover 300 gold. Feel free to add Trolls or Entities to this room to make it more challenging.

**6) Kitchen:** This is where captured local people were skinned and butchered. The widest varieties of Entities linger here. The people were still alive when they were butchered, leaving a dark psychic imprint. There is at least one kind of each Entity in this room and they will attack. All of the kitchen equipment in this room is giant-sized. 1D4 Syphon Entities have possessed cutlery, Haunting Entities replay the butchery that occurred here, 1D4 piles of junk will rise up to fight the players and two mummies and six Trolls will attack. The Trolls had just finished preparing the skin and meat of their most recent kill(s), 1D8 Grimbor.

**7) Troll Barracks:** This is the sleeping quarters of the bulk of the Troll mercenary force. There are 12 Trolls sleeping throughout this room. They will fight to the death if awoken. The room is smashed up like all the other rooms. Each Troll carries 1D6x100 gold on them.

**8) Large Freshwater Lake:** There are no animals living in this lake other than crayfish and blind crabs. It has been closed off from the rest of the world for thousands of years. Centuries of erosion and water collection formed this vast, fresh body of water. It is safe and healthy to drink. The water is constantly refilled due to the heavy rainfall in the Yin-Sloth Jungles and is filtered as it passes through sand and rock.

**9) Foyer:** Eight mummies stand guard and will attack any non-Trolls on sight. Any Trolls may pass freely. If the players retreat outside the cave they will leave combat and walk back to their posts.

## The Forge Room

This is an impressive forge area. There is a large hearth, enchanted anvil and a slack tub full of oil. The anvil sits in the center of a Summoner Circle. Anyone familiar with such circles will see it is a Summon Entities and Ghosts circle and it is permanent. There is also a large amount of iron ore and coal ready to be forged. When the players enter the room and the hidden Troll can see the players are not other Trolls, he will come out of hid-

ing. A gruff, but clearly weak and frightened voice calls out from behind the coal bin.

“Great warriors, please no harm me. I no crazed.”

A large Troll blacksmith slowly stands with his hands in the air to prove he carries no weapons. This poor soul was one of the Troll mercenaries hired to protect the Western Alchemists. He will beg the players to protect him from the ghosts and will tell them all he knows. If asked, he will tell the players his story:

“We great warriors from Old Kingdom. We paid to bring soft human Alchemists to cave and protect while work. We told they re-make rune magic and we be given the first weapon when work finished. I make the weapons that be enchanted.

“When we reached the caves we make a small camp outside and start to carve the tunnels into a den. When the make-weapons room was done, I start to make weapons while the Alchemists make spells. We have many failures. One time weapons I make jump up and start to attack everyone in room. My friends battle weapons until humans undid their magic. Another time humans summoned a demon, it broke free from its magic bindings and attacked. Again my friends battle it until it was destroyed. I begin to think humans were stupid, would never succeed and might be good to eat.

“Finally we succeed! We make special anvil in the forge room. It has lead sphere filled with quicksilver inside. The Alchemists enchant anvil so it not break when I make weapons. They make magic circle around anvil. When done, they make spell and I make claymore. I feel different when make... something with me when make sword.

“When make sword done they make another magic on the claymore I make. I pick up sword and it live! Sword tell me it make telekinesis and with thought I move things in room. The sword and I are as one; it know what I want before me know. It was as breathing! Other human make runes on sword and we succeed! I excite! We make what only stupid Dwarves make, rune weapons.

“Humans make blood sacrifice with natives for magic. I make armor and weapons. We not make weapons for every friend but many. They go jungle to test weapons with natives; they work good; friends return covered in native blood. They take more natives for make blood sacrifices and I make weapons and armor. These new weapons would make us rule Old Kingdom.

“Then all go bad. I make me hammer which make see invisible. I see the ghosties made by humans in circle and I see ghosties go in anvil. I know humans’ secret: ghosties make rune weapons, but me not understand what magic make rune weapons. I see too some ghosties free in halls. I see one ghostie go in chest of one friend. He look me with dead look and go away. Others see ghosties of people we kill and frightened. How make fight with ghostie? We want make leave, but leader tell stay, more weapons coming. Some me friends act strange for weeks then humans make scream. Friends go see why humans scream, I go to make-weapon room; it the ghosties.

“Ghosties make friends different. I keep food and water in room and hope friends go, but they stay and bring natives to eat. I afraid ghosties make me different, so I stayed in room, ghosties no come here and I had food. My hope was someone come to kill my friends and you come. Please help me make escape, protect me from ghosties. I help you carry the anvil out, I help you make rune weapons, I do anything you ask, please help me.”

If the players offer to help him, he will be happy and cooperative. He will do whatever the players tell him. When they get out he will either head to the Orc Empire or join the Jaguar Tribe depending on how things shake out. If told he will not be helped he will sprint toward the exit. He is out of food and water; there will be no other choice for him. He won't make it. He will be possessed and likely fight the players as a possessed Troll later on.

If told he was tricked by the Alchemists, that they were not real rune weapons, he will be crushed and will break down crying. He has been through a lot. All of his friends and comrades are all possessed or dead. He is starved and dehydrated. The one accomplishment that may have made it worthwhile, re-discovering rune magic, is found to be a fraud. It will be too much for him. His mental breakdown will take about a month with care from someone who cares or a spiritual advisor. Recovery will take him much longer on his own. When he comes though it he will be a much stronger person. He will realize his savage life has brought him nothing but misery. He will be reborn. But until then they will have to lead him out of the cave.

## What Next?

If the players defeat the Trolls but don't exorcize the Entities around the forge then the status quo will be restored to this region. The cave network will be seen as a cursed area and all tribes will stay away. The players will be heroes and honorary Jaguar Head Tribe members. If they exorcize the cave network, teach the Giants how to forge steel or magic weapons, the players will be considered champions of the village and full members of the tribe. Under this scenario, the Gigantes will overrun the other tribes, killing most and enslaving the rest. They will be more likely to join the Kingdom of Giants if the players suggest it. They would be a valuable asset to the kingdom. Not only would this give King Blackrock a foothold in the Jungles but access to some very talented masons, stone workers and a new form of magic weapons. If the players help the other native tribes destroy the Jaguar Head Tribe, after they deal with the Trolls, they will be considered heroes but the other tribes will go back to warring with each other; peace will be short-lived.

## History of the False Rune Forge

The forge was constructed by a team of Western Empire Alchemists, commissioned by a wealthy noble who wanted them to rediscover the secrets of rune magic. The Alchemists wanted to do their work in secret and traveled to the Yin-Sloth Jungles where they would not be disturbed by nosy nobles, spies or wizards. They hired Troll mercenaries to protect them on their journey and to guard them while they worked. The Trolls were given a down-payment of gold and the promise of being the first to be equipped with the new rune weapons. They found a secluded cave north of the Great Bog that was also a place of magic.

The Alchemists knew that a life force would be needed to create a rune item. One specialized in summoning and it was his job to summon creatures specifically for sacrifice. Another Alchemist was proficient in creating magic items and the final member of the trio was an Alchemist who specialized in Diabolism. One of the Trolls was a blacksmith by trade and was brought in to do the forging. They all had their parts and through great trial and error,

and lots of sacrificed creatures, they came as close as anyone will likely get to rediscovering rune magic.

They theorized that the spirit of the sacrificed creature must go through some kind of transmutation before it can become one with a forged item and created a special anvil for the process. The core of the iron anvil was filled with quicksilver, encased in a lead sphere. They thought that since quicksilver is ever-changing it may have a changing effect on life forces. They enchanted the anvil with indestructibility so it would not shatter during the forging process. A circle of Summon Ghosts and Entities was placed around the anvil.

They summoned an Entity and forced it into the quicksilver core of the anvil. The metal was heated in the hearth until it was soft and forged on the anvil. The physical process of forging the metal also 'forged' the Entity within the quicksilver. The shockwaves of the hammering rippled through the quicksilver and transformed the Entity into something different. The wizard used Immure Entity to force the now-malleable Entity into the newly forged item. The two became one. The Entity is indistinguishable from the steel. The Alchemists then placed Rune Symbols on the weapon. The runes did not have any practical purpose but made the final product look like a rune weapon. They came to realize that they would never be able to create true rune weapons and they were running out of time. They had to produce results.

They created giant-sized armor and weapons to equip their Troll mercenaries and ordered them to go out into the jungles and kill natives. This was done to field-test their new weapons and ease the Trolls' bloodlust. The Trolls were very happy with the new armaments and wanted more, believing that they wielded true rune weapons.

Once the Alchemists believed they had a convincing product, they started to forge extra weapons for export to the Western Empire. That's when the tragedy started. The Alchemists were found murdered in their rooms, butchered like animals. The Troll guards were helpless and seemed frightened and confused. Eventually they were all possessed by Entities.

In their haste to set up the forge they forgot to put up any protection against free-roaming Entities. They were overconfident and rushed in their work and forgot about basic precautions. One by one the Troll mercenaries were taken over by Possessing Entities that still control them. The Trolls don't understand what has happened to them. They undergo blackout periods that can last for days; when they come to they are covered in blood and the dead bodies of natives litter their living quarters. Every time one tries to go back to the Old Kingdom they return in a daze. Living this way has turned them feral. They kill anyone entering the cave network on sight. The only Troll not possessed was the blacksmith. He collected supplies and hid in the forge room; the only room the Entities avoided. He does not know what has happened, only that his former friends have gone crazy... crazy even for Trolls. He plans to wait in his room until his supplies run out then make a run for it – or hope for rescue until then.

## Average Possessed Troll

**Alignment:** Diabolic.

**Hit Points:** 45. **S.D.C.:** 79.

**O.C.C.:** Mercenary.

**Attributes:** I.Q. 12, M.E. 6, M.A. 1, P.S. 29, P.P. 14, P.E. 21, P.B. 7, Spd 18.

**Horror Factor:** 12

**P.P.E.:** 10

**Age:** 32. **Level:** 6th. **Sex:** Both.

**Height:** 12-14 feet (3.6-4.3 m). **Weight:** 300 pounds (135 kg).

**Disposition:** Insane. They have gone totally feral and attack any living creature that enters the cave network, except those possessed by Entities. They do not enter the forge room. They have a deep-seated fear of that room. They have lost the ability to speak or understand language.

**O.C.C. Skills:** Climb/Scale Walls 75/70%, Athletics (General), Wilderness Survival 65%, W.P. Sword, W.P. Shield, W.P. Paired Weapons, W.P. Knife, Hand to Hand: Expert.

**O.C.C. Related Skills:** Carpentry 30%, Detect Ambush 60%, Land Navigation 34%, Prowl 50%, Recognize Weapon Quality 55%, Wrestling, W.P. Forked Weapon, W.P. Thrown Weapons, Masonry 40%, Sculpting & Whittling 40%, Skin & Prepare Animal Hides 30%, Track and Trap Animals 20/30%.

**Secondary Skills:** Body Building, Forced March, Running, W.P. Blunt, W.P. Chain, W.P. Spear.

**Natural Abilities:** Nightvision 60 feet (18.3 m), excellent day vision, instinctive climbers 75/65%, and swimming 60%.

**Description:** These are very tall and skinny Trolls. Before they were possessed they were as muscular and well fed as any Troll, but since they went feral they have become lean, bony and unhealthy. They are unwashed and smell like the dead.

**Equipment:** The possessed Trolls have discarded most of their equipment, living like animals.

**Armor & Weapons:** All weapons and equipment are giant-sized, providing one extra die of damage. Roll 2D10 twice, once for the weapon and once for the armor: 01-40% is one common enchantment on a standard weapon. 41-60% is an Entity weapon. 61-00% is a non-magic weapon. 01-30% is one common enchantment on standard armor. 31-50% is Entity armor. 51-00% is a non-magic armor (chain mail, double mail, scale or splint mail).

**Gold:** Each Troll has 1D6x10 gold and 1D12x10 silver coins. They have one set of dirty clothes and a water skin.

**Combat:** Number of Attacks: 4. Punch: 2D6, Kick: 3D6, Karate Kick: 2D4 or 1D6, Bite: 2D4, Body Block/Tackle: 2D4, Crush/Squeeze: 2D4, Critical Strike on a Natural 19 or 20, Pin/Incapacitate: 18, 19, 20.

**Bonuses:** +14 damage, +1 to strike, +2 to parry, +2 to dodge, +3 to roll with fall or impact, +2 to pull punch. +3 to save vs spell/ward, +3 to save vs toxins/poisons, +3 to save vs Horror Factor, +12% to save vs Coma/Death.

**Average Troll Mummy,** I.Q. 4, P.S. 20, P.P. 10, P.E. 18, P.B. 2, Spd 7. Horror Factor: 10. S.D.C.: 70. Wrappings A.R.: 10 & S.D.C.: 50. Attacks per Melee: 3, Damage: 3D6. Bonuses: +1 to strike, +1 to parry. The mummies' last orders were to protect the cave and the Trolls inside. They won't attack a Troll.

## Red Journal

There are no page numbers, dates or names in this journal.

"Hah! A noble of the empire has offered me one million gold to rediscover rune magic. I say again, Hah! What a fool. If I could uncover rune magic what need would I have for his paltry sums? I did receive a down-payment of 100,000 gold to start my work and 50,000 for anyone I hire to help me. I can use the time to

experiment with magic weapons and armor. I don't even have to re-discover the lost art, the 100,000 gold is mine even if I 'fail.' I accepted the offer and I could use a paid vacation. Hah! I have friends who specialize in summoning and weapon enchantments. I will contact them post haste.

"I was in conference with my companions and they have agreed. While I still don't believe we can uncover the lost art, they seem to think we have a chance. We cast the Ritual of True Sight and uncovered a cave in the Yin-Sloth Jungles that will allow us to work in private. There are too many nosy nobles, spies and wizards in the Empire for this kind of work.

"My weapons master has been in contact with a Troll mercenary company. They have a trained blacksmith. They will escort us to our cave and guard us while we are there. They work cheap and will get first crack at field-testing the new weapons. They are eager to get their hands on 'Rune Weapons'... Hah! Fools are born every minute.

"We have booked passage by sea to the Orcish Empire. The Trolls have contacts there and can guarantee our safety. I have doubts about an 'Orc Empire.' It is probably an empire as much as Orc cooking is fine dining, Hah!

"The sea trip was uneventful, I always hear of sea monsters and pirates but there was no such event. How depressing, just a long, boring sea trip with smelly Trolls and questionable meat. The Trolls said it was pork but I am not so sure. I was surprised to see how organized the orcs are. While they certainly cannot be considered an 'Empire,' they are more organized than the tribes of the Old Kingdom. While they are a curiosity indeed, they offer us nothing except a port to dock and transport goods.

"The Trolls have done a good job excavating the cavern network. Some of the rooms are livable now and they set up a drainage system which keep the rooms dry and diverts excess water to the lake. The next step is discussing the nature of rune magic and how we go about re-discovering the art. I don't believe it is possible but my colleagues are taking this task seriously."

The rest of the journal discusses the nature of magic and rune magic. Reading this section of the journal will give the player a +5% bonus to any magic-based lore skill. It will take about three weeks to gain this bonus. This takes up a good portion of the middle of the book.

"Time is growing short and our Troll guards are getting antsy. They simply do not understand the complicated nature of merging a living spirit with a weapon. We have had only failures and they were promised the first use of rune weapons. I have an idea. I think we can forge a rune-like weapon. Quicksilver is an ever-changing substance and has some application in transformation magic. Would it be possible to use mercury to change an Entity into something usable in weapon crafting?"

The next several chapters show diagrams of different forge room designs with quicksilver balls and pools in different locations. The final diagram shown in the book looks like it was the one they settled on. It is a giant-sized anvil made from iron. In the center of the forge is a hollow lead sphere. That sphere is filled with quicksilver.

“SUCCESS!!! We have created as close a duplicate as anyone will ever get. These new magic weapons clearly have a rudimentary intelligence, possess psionic powers and are controllable by the user of the weapon. HAH! The trolls are very happy and have gone out to kill the native people and animals. If they come back happy we have something that will fool our patron. Once we collect the million gold we can relocate to the Eastern Territories and set up our own ‘rune smithing’ shop, HAH!

“It was a success. The Trolls are happy. We are packing up some small samples to send to our patron. We also have our blacksmith working overtime. We want to build up as much of a reserve as possible. Tonight I rest. It was hard and worrying work and I have lost much sleep wondering if we would succeed in some small fashion or have to pay these smelly Trolls more gold.”

The journal ends there.

## False Rune Forge

The forging room looks like any other room. The one part of the room that makes the magic possible is the anvil. It is an iron anvil with a lead sphere in the middle, filled with quicksilver. A Summoner forces an ethereal being into the quicksilver and traps it there. The blacksmith starts to forge an item. The vibrations from the forging process make ripples in the quicksilver and as the quicksilver changes, the Entity in the quicksilver also changes. When the forging process is finished, the Entity is forced into the newly forged item through the Immure Entity spell. The newly changed Entity and the forged item become one new being/item. It can communicate with its new owner through telepathy and/or empathy, depending on which powers it had originally, at no I.S.P. cost. The being does not bond with its owner. Anyone of any alignment can use it. The being obeys whoever carries the item.

The energy to forge these Entities is costly and most of the Entity is burned up in the forging process. Only one psionic or magic power is left after the forging process. No extra P.P.E. is needed to forge these items, except for the other spells needed to move the spirits around.

**Common Abilities:** 1) Communicate through Telepathy and/or Empathy. 2) Has a base P.P.E. or I.S.P. reserve. 3) Has one psionic or magic power. 4) I.S.P. /P.P.E. regeneration. 5) Regenerate 2D6 S.D.C. per hour. 6) The weapon’s owner cannot use his own I.S.P. or P.P.E. to power the item’s ability, the item can only use its own reserve. 7) If the item is destroyed the Entity is also destroyed. 8) The armor and weapons are magic, harm supernatural creatures and become M.D.C. in those environments.

**Haunting Entity:** Are primarily psionic creatures and have an I.S.P. reserve of 24. They regenerate 1 I.S.P. every hour. They cannot draw I.S.P. from others or the environment. The sword functions as an 8th level psychic. Roll 1D6: 1. Ectoplasm. 2. Mind Block. 3. Presence Sense. 4. See the Invisible. 5. Telekinesis. 6. Total Recall.

**Poltergeist:** Are primarily psionic creatures, have an I.S.P. reserve of 12 and function as 4th level psychics. They regenerate 5 I.S.P. every hour. They cannot draw I.S.P. from others or the environment. Roll 1D4: 1. Levitation. 2. See Aura. 3. See the Invisible. 4. Sense Magic.

**Possessing Entity:** They are primarily psionic creatures and have an I.S.P. reserve of 24 and function as a 6th level psychic. They regenerate 1 I.S.P. per hour. They cannot draw I.S.P. from others or the environment. Roll 1D8: 1. Bio-Manipulation. 2. Death Trance. 3. Impervious to Fire. 4. Levitation. 5. Mind Block. 6. See the Invisible. 7. Sixth Sense. 8. Telekinesis.

**Syphon Entity:** Are primarily psionic creatures and have an I.S.P. reserve of 24 and function as a 6th level psychic. They regenerate 1 I.S.P. per hour. They cannot draw I.S.P. from others or the environment. Roll 1D8: 1. Bio-Manipulation. 2. Hypnotic Suggestion. 3. Levitation. 4. Mind Block. 5. Presence Sense. 6. See Aura. 7. See the Invisible. 8. Sixth Sense.

**Tectonic Entity:** Are primarily psionic creatures and have an I.S.P. reserve of 24 and function as a 4th level psychic. It regenerates 1 I.S.P. per hour. They cannot draw I.S.P. from others or the environment. Roll 1D6: 1. Mind Block. 2. Presence Sense. 3. See Aura. 4. See the Invisible. 5. Sixth Sense. 6. Telekinesis.

**Nymph:** Are primarily Magic creatures even though they have psionic abilities. When an item is forged with a Nymph essence the item will have one magic ability and has P.P.E.: 30. It regenerates P.P.E. at 1.25 P.P.E. per hour and functions as a 5<sup>th</sup> level spell. Roll 1D20: 1. Animate Plants. 2. Call Lightning. 3. Calm Storms. 4. Calm Waters. 5. Dust Storm. 6. Extinguish Fires. 7-8. Faerie’s Dance. 9. Finger of the Wind. 10. Grow Plants. 11. Levitation. 12. Ley Line Transmission. 13-14. Purple Mist. 15. Repel Animals. 16. Sleep. 17-18. Thunder Clap. 19. Wall of Thorns. 20. Wind Rush.

**Will-O-The-Wisp:** They are Faeries and will be infused with one magic power that has P.P.E.: 30. They regenerate P.P.E. at 1.25 P.P.E. per hour and function as 5<sup>th</sup> level spells. Roll 1D10: 1. Call Lightning. 2. Circle of Rain. 3. Create Fog. 4. Earth Rumble. 5. Extinguish Fires. 6-7. Globe of Daylight. 8. Mend Cloth. 9. Purple Mist. 10. Wind Rush.

**Note:** In other worlds there are other Entities which could also be used to forge false rune weapons if they could be summoned or if the forge was moved to the other world. Ethereal Deevils and demonic beings such as Banshees can also be used but summoning infernal creatures comes with greater risk.

## Jaguar Head Tribe

Many generations ago the Gigantes of this area were much like all others. They wandered the landscape eating whatever they could catch and acting very anti-social. A small group found four giant stone structures; one was a step pyramid with carvings of a jaguar headed deity. They spent the night in the pyramid and felt at home with these buildings. They decided to stay in this area and make a home here. The children of these first Giants were born with the heads of great cats and half of those had jaguar heads. They considered this a blessing from the god carved into the temple and started to worship him. Over time the tribe grew and their skill at stone carving became as good as the Tezcat. They are at constant war with the native tribes and should they acquire a large number of metal arms will quickly overcome and enslave their non-Giant neighbors. They are more cooperative than most Gigantes and more talented, but still fierce warriors who seek trade and friendship with the greater Giant cities.

**Type & Size of Community:** Barbarian Settlement. (Towns & Cities modified from *Rifts® Adventure Guide*.)

**A. Weapons & Armor:** Limited, 5 points. The community makes high-quality stone weapons, equal in quality to Tezcat/Jotan weapons.

**B. Medicine:** Good, 10 points. There are five midwives with Holistic Medicine, two Holistic tribal healers and one assistant.

**C. Agriculture & Natural Resources:** Good, 15 points.

**D. Real Estate/Land:** Prime Location, 15 points.

**E. Work Animals:** Very Basic. A few good, strong work animals, 6 points.

**F. Administration & Social Structure:** Sound Structure, 10 points. They have a tribal chief who is advised by the tribal shamans. Should he die, the shamans will appoint a new chief.

**G. Alignment:** Anarchist & Miscreant, 2 points.

**H. Magic:** Good Knowledge, 10 points. There are five tribal shamans.

**I. Racial Tolerance:** Disapproving & Suspicious, 1 point. The Gigantes believe Giants are a superior species and all others must be dominated or destroyed.

**J. Trade:** Internal. They don't trade with human tribes, only Giant tribes – and there are no Giant tribes close to them. The Giants will raid human tribes, 2 points.

**K. Threats:** Moderately & Dangerous. The other tribes can be dangerous but not strong enough to destroy the tribe, 10 points.

**L. Skill Levels & Professionalism:** Merchant. There is one merchant who trades tribal goods with the Giant cities of Cyclone, Nimeret, Titania and Freedara, 5 points.

**M. The Community Overall:** Average. Workers, mostly uneducated. 30% of the tribe are highly skilled craftsmen and 6% are literate in Human-Southern, 5 points.

**N. Shelter:** Good. Most buildings are solid, made from wood or bamboo. Four buildings are made from stone, a large temple to a Jaguar deity, a plaza for crafting and internal trade, chief's living quarters and the shamans' ritual/teaching building, 7 points.

**O. Security & Fighting Force:** Volunteer Militia. About 20% of the tribe regularly trains for war. The entire tribe will rise up to defend their tribe, 7 points.

**P. Power/Energy:** None. They do not have access to coal, water or windmills. They only burn wood for cooking and crafting.

**Q. Special:** None.

**Total Points Spent:** 110 points. **Total Population:** 400.

## The Bloody Elf

This Troll mercenary company was an elite platoon of warriors operating in the Old Kingdom just outside the Western Empire. They were usually hired by the Western Empire to enforce its will outside the empire's borders. A trio of Western Empire Alchemists hired them to escort them to the Yin-Sloth Jungles and guard them while they recreated rune magic. They were paid 10,000 gold and promised the first batch of rune weapons created. The Trolls were prepared for any physical threat they might face from dragons to diseases, but not for the threat that ultimately defeated them.

The horrifying experiments and the bloodthirsty nature of the Trolls attracted a variety of Entities to the False Rune Forge. The Entities slowly infiltrated the cavern network and did what they do best, frighten the Trolls. After they were unnerved the Possessing Entities took over. The Alchemists were too busy with their work to take note of the Entities. They only took notice when their once loyal guards hacked them to bits and ate them.

Today they have gone totally feral. Even if the Possessing Entities are exorcized they will continue killing and eating people.

**Size & Orientation:** Minor Company. (Mercenary Company modified from *Rifts® Adventure Guide*.)

**Sponsorship:** Independent.

**A. Outfits:** Specialty Clothing. Standard armor is chain or double mail. Elite warriors have scale or splint mail. 20 points.

**B. Equipment:** Medical Equipment: All-Purpose Remedy (Tonic), Healing Potions, Negate Poison Potion, Truth Serum, Magic Bandages, and Rodoffrin. 10 points.

**C. Vehicles:** Fleet Vehicles. A stable of workhorses and wagons. 10 points.

**D. Weapons, Magic Armor & Automatons:** Extensive Weaponry: All weapons are high-quality, 40% are magic with one enchantment, and 30% of the group has magic armor with one enchantment. They have 18 mummies. 40 points.

**E. Communications:** None.

**F. Internal Security:** Tight. 10 points.

**G. Permanent Bases:** None.

**H. Intelligence Resources:** Scout Detachment: 6 Troll Rangers. 5 points.

**I. Special Budget:** None.

**J. General Alignment of Personnel:** Evil, Miscreant & Diabolic.

**K. Criminal Activity:** Gang of Robbers. 10 points.

**L. Reputation:** Known. 10 points.

**M. Salary:** Good Salary. 10 points.

**Total Personnel:** 40 warriors, 18 Mummies, 10 Thieves and 6 Rangers.

**Total Points Spent:** 125

## The Knights Traveler

The Order was the brainchild of several Western Empire nobles who wanted to travel to the Eastern Territories in safety and secrecy. If they used their own regional guards, people might find out of their excursions to the east. To do this, the nobles pooled their resources and hired independent knights and palladins to set up a chivalrous order dedicated to protecting travelers when they move from west to east though the Old Kingdom.

A stronghold was built in the northern mountain range of the Old Kingdom where they train squires to become knights and palladins. The Order recruits both men and women from the lower social classes. New squires see the order as an honor, not a right of birth. When a serf, for example, is rescued from his lord's land, he is given many more opportunities as a traveling warrior or knight. The serfs willingly abandon their old family ties and adopt the Knights Traveler as a new family.

They recruit Dwarves, Elves and humans as squires. They will train some of the monster races at the request of their sponsors, but they are never considered part of the Order, even if some nobles want exotic, highly-trained bodyguards such as Trolls and Ogres. Furthermore, the knights do not train slaves. A slave must be freed before they undergo training. The Order prides itself on liberating slaves and subjugated people, not returning them to bondage.

When a squire becomes a knight or Palladin, they go through a purification ceremony. This is a symbolic ceremony as the new knight casts off his old life and obligations for his new existence. All new knights go through the same ceremony whether they are



recruits or trained by request of a noble. When they are knighted they are presented with their superior quality weapon(s). Regardless of the knight's former social ranking, the Knights Traveler will help the new knight craft his own crest. The crest is painted on their shield.

The Order has also networked with a merchants' guild in the Eastern Territories to protect their merchant caravans traveling through the Old Kingdom for a fee. The Order would like to guard all eastern and western caravans though the area. This would give them enough money and power to cast off the petty nobles who spawned the Order. The merchants are happy with the arrangement and this has turned into a friendship between the two.

The Knights Traveler is not a courtly Order but a militant one. They are not taught to dance. They are instead taught Area Knowledge of the Old Kingdom (+20% skill) and Law (+15% skill). To safely guard caravans and nobles, the knights must be familiar with the roads, monster clans and safe havens along the way. They also need to know the law in regards to the Eastern Territory. Some western nobles like to transport contraband and local authorities sometimes have cause to search wagons and mule-trains. The knight must know what authority he has in the Eastern Territories. No one else will be permitted to go near their charge.

New sponsors are sometimes networked into the cabal that funds the Order. One such noble had recently purchased a Gigante child slave and wanted the slave to fight in the arenas of the Western Empire. He had seen Giants lose to highly trained warriors before and wanted to provide his slave with the very best combat training.

He decided he would have his Gigante slave trained as a paladin. Not only would that give his slave the elite combat training he wanted but would also upset the high and mighty palladins to see such a lowly, barbaric monster as one of them. He sent word to the Order that he wanted them to train his slave.

The Order refused. It was clear to them that the Giant was going to be a slave gladiator in the arena and not set free. They also did not want to train a Gigante as a paladin. They were offended by the idea of a barbaric mutant like a Gigante as a noble paladin and they did not want to be part of it. The petulant noble sent word that if they did not train his slave he would cut off funding and expose the order to both the Western Empire and the eastern kingdoms. If they did accept he would keep quiet, continue funding and he would give them 100,000 gold as payment for the training. Under the circumstances they grudgingly agreed and accepted the young Giant as a squire.

While the Giant's training started, the Order weighed their options. They could not send the Giant back to the noble as a slave. They were honor bound to free the Giant once his training was complete, but that would break the contract with the noble. If they freed the Giant then the noble would do as he said, exposing the Order. The existence of an independent military force entering the eastern kingdoms, funded by western nobles, would cause concern to those kingdoms and would put their knights in greater danger. It would also cause concern in the west, their sponsors may be arrested and a task force could be sent to destroy the Knights Traveler. That was not an option. They knew the noble would not accept payment for the Giant's freedom. He was obsessed with upsetting the knights in the west and wanted to see his Giant slave kill in the arena. They could not claim the Giant escaped after training, the noble would not believe that and rat

out the Order. They had run out of options. The Order sent their Wizard Enforcer to deal with the noble.

About halfway through the Giant's training his master died of 'natural causes.' The noble was such a miserable human that no one, not even his family, was upset by his passing. The Order told the Giant his master was dead and he would be free once the training was over. The Giant worked harder and was more dedicated to duty. He graduated, went through the purification ceremony, was knighted and given his symbols of authority: Dwarven quality, giant-sized, matching longsword and dagger. The Giant was now Sir Regar of Freedara and told to find his own destiny in the world.

**Type & Size of Syndicate:** Knightly Order (Brotherhood), 120 points. (Syndicates & Secret Organizations modified from Rifts Adventure Guide.)

**Sponsorship:** A secret cartel of Western Nobles (Merchants), +10 Communications, +20 Equipment and +10 any category.

**A. Dress:** Excellent, 20 points. Soldiers, knights and Palladins are provided with heavy armor, chain mail to plate. Any member can get light armor as needed. Armor can also be repaired at cost.

**B. Equipment:** Medical Clinic, 20 points. The Order's stronghold has a medical clinic staffed by a monk with all medical skills (doctor), a psychic healer, assisted by four monks with first-aid skills (nurses) and two monks with biology, first aid and holistic medicine skills (paramedics). There is also a small veterinarian facility to take care of the Order's horses.

**C. Vehicles:** Ground Fleet, 10 points. The order has a wide variety of horses and wagons to meet its needs. It has riding horses for squires, War Steeds for Knights, workhorses for carriages and wagons.

**D. Weapons:** Extensive Weapons, 20 points. Any human-made weapon is available from melee to ranged weapons. The chief weaponsmith is a Dwarf who constructs one superior 2 handed-weapon at +800% the weapon's value or two 1 handed-weapons at +400% the weapon's value each, for squires who are knighted. These weapons are only given freely once. They are symbols of knightly authority. If they are lost or stolen the knight must pay full price to get them replaced. Standard weapons are replaced without cost.

**E. Magic Armor & Automatons:** None.

**F. Communications:** Basic Service, 2 points. There is one mounted courier in the stronghold that is capable of delivering messages. The knight's squires can also deliver important messages for their knight.

**G. Security:** Tight, 10 points. Soldiers who guard the stronghold have the skills Intelligence and Surveillance.

**H. Headquarters:** Stronghold, 35 points. Type 2 Fort. The Order is headquartered in a fort surrounded by a dry moat located in the northern mountains of the Old Kingdom. It can house all members.

**I. Intelligence:** Wilderness Scouts, 5 points. The knights have a squad of six Rangers who patrol the area around the keep. They keep an eye on monster tribes and movements.

**J. Monthly Budget:** Reasonable, 10 points. 3,000 gold per month.

**K. General Alignment:** Unprincipled, 6 points.

**L. Criminal Activity:** Wizard Enforcer, 12 points.

**M. Reputation:** Unknown, 5 points. That's the way they like it.

**N. Monthly Salary:** Freelance, 5 points.

**O. Special:** None.

**P. Disadvantages:** None.

**Total Points Spent:** 320

**Total Personnel:** 32 Knights and Paladins, 32 Squires, 8 Monks, 6 Rangers, 5 Weaponsmiths, 1 Wizard Enforcer, 1 Mounted Courier, and 16 Soldiers who guard the fort, tend the animals and perform all other necessary duties.

# A Cold Night, Dead Past

## A Story for Rifts®

By Brett Caron

After a while, one learns to recognize the smell of death. Old death, that is; not the acrid reek of a person recently shuffled off this mortal coil, not the rot. Just the lingering pall in the air of a room that hasn't yet lost the scent of its previous occupant; but there's something else, something underneath that speaks to a part of our animal brains that we hardly know how to listen to anymore. It can make someone feel like the dead person is still there, in a way.

Even standing outside the door, his face close to the chipped paint of the dented metal surface, Frost could smell it, could feel it. His body was pressed against the door, blocking the view to any passers-by as he used his lockpicks on the tumbler set into the metal. Glancing left and right, Frost growled in his throat faintly and continued to gently twist and prod with the tools extending from his bionic hands. The hallway was dark, a single flickering light bulb the only illumination, the rest dead or broken. Frost kept one eye on the door at the end of the hall. The sunlight outside shone through the dusty, yellowed glass; he could even see the faint suggestion of snowflakes blowing in the wind. The howling roar would be reduced to a faint whistling scream, but his enhanced hearing picked it up as easily as if he was standing in the middle of the gale.

One corner of his mouth pulled back over his teeth in satisfaction. His picks slid back into his wrist; the lock clicked open. Cheap motels have cheap locks – and this motel was the cheapest you could find this far from Old Bones. He took another glance around and slipped inside.

Frost stood in the small, flea-ridden motel room and curled his lip with mild disgust. He sniffed, an unspoken command for the artificial intelligence implanted in his body cavity to begin sampling and analyzing the air via tiny chips in his nostrils, scrolling chemical composition down one side of his field of vision as the powerful computer identified the odors of the room. When he'd had the device built it had come with an absurd backronym: Sensory Extrapolation and Intelligent Detection unit, or S.E.I.D. Frost just called it Seed, and now Seed was taking in the environment and relaying its conclusions to its master. He smelled old blood, new blood and other fluids in the mattress he wasn't nearly as interested in. The history of this room came alive in a different way. He knew that the teenager he was looking for, along with three other adult men, had been here at the same time; the room though, this was the kid's room. His nose also validated the hunch that struck him as soon as he reached the room, the smell of old death. Someone had been killed here. Not his quarry, one of the other three. Frost relaxed ever so slightly but his jaw remained clenched; he could smell the kid's blood, too.

Another sub-vocal command and his vision cycled to the ultraviolet spectrum, bringing an entirely different overlay into view. The luminous puddles and stains across the room had been cleaned,

but not enough to fool his optics. His eye whirred and focused as his vision went microscopic and back again, rotating through every spectrum of light. As the computer in his gut processed the data and drew conclusions, the scene came alive with information. He could tell the age of the bloodstains, the brand of cologne one of the men wore (a cheap one at that), the residue from gunshots – and the puzzle pieces began to fit together in his mind. It became quickly apparent that the man he was looking for had been here, been wounded but not killed, then had left under his own power. He scowled again as the truth set in. The City Rat – the hacker kid he and everybody else just called Squirt, the one he was really here for – was gone.

Squirt had been a source of irritation for the Headhunter since the day they'd met. Frost, along with the other founding members of his mercenary outfit, had found him in the slums of Ishpeming; half-starved, trying to pay off his mortgaged cybernetics to a small-time crime boss by picking electronic locks for local mercs. He'd been a glorified slave, but he did his job extremely well – likely the reason he was kept on such a short leash. It was also probably the reason he'd stayed alive as long as he had. Frost had heard of the kid, so when he and his mercs needed a codebreaker, they came calling on the crime boss on behalf of the newly-formed Happy Ending Solutions. It was just another job until things started to go sideways between Frost's crew and the gang.

Squirt found himself suddenly liberated a couple of days later. His "owner" attempted to extort the mercenaries, and after one cross word too many, Frost unceremoniously murdered the coward in front of his flunkies, sending a clear message about the consequences of trying to double-cross Happy Endings. Watching all this via a video feed, the kid had fixed the Headhunter as a hero.

Frost was abundantly clear that he didn't like the kid, but no matter how blunt and obvious he made it that he wasn't looking for new friends, the young man-boy clutched even tighter to his hero-worship. Frost never wanted to be a role model; even when he was a leader of men, a lifetime ago, he had only ever done so with reluctance. Now that Squirt had vanished, he felt the loss much keener that he had thought he would. He was only here in the first place because of the message he'd received from the kid – a short, clipped transmission in the early morning. Despite the garbled sound and image quality, Frost had seen enough to leave immediately for the source – this dump of a motel. There was enough blood on the kid in that video that he hadn't wasted any time, either. The source of the feed had come from this location, but the firefight had gone down at least a day or two before. It didn't make any sense.

Frost began to search the room in earnest, cycling through ultraviolet, visible light and infrared as he rifled through drawers and shelves. He knocked on the walls in a few suspicious places, hop-



ing his amplified hearing would catch the hollow sound of a hidden panel. While he combed the room, an icon lit up over a desk lamp on his heads-up display. *Surveillance device, NG-2476X1 – Jammed*, advised his HUD. Frost grinned. His onboard computer was programmed to automatically detect and jam surveillance devices within a small radius – enough of a distance that the bug had most likely gone dark as soon as he entered the room. Almost too predictable.

However, it did mean that he had to hurry; whoever placed the bug was probably looking for Squirt too. If the kid had been stupid enough to hang around after the fight, they might already have him. No need to help them out. As a matter of fact, it would be relatively easy to throw them off – or just take care of them himself. Frost continued to scan the area; finding nothing, he grabbed a piece of clothing and took a long sniff. He told Seed to continuously monitor the molecular analyzer for that scent, then dropped the shirt and spat. His quarry wasn't the most fragrant of individuals – spending most of your time in front of a computer screen will do that.

Seed traced the bug's transmissions to a large panel van outside and Frost strained his hearing, filtering out everything but the faintest sounds coming from within. Muffled voices reached his ears, but even with amplified hearing, he couldn't make out the words at this distance.

The grungy, dim hallway of the motel passed by on either side until he reached the front door, passing the dead man sprawled out on the dark wood surface of the counter, laser fire having blown away much of his left arm and torso. The meat was cooked around the edges, but for the most part the flesh was simply gone. He paused, moved back to the front desk and stepped behind the counter. Frost reached out with a cybernetic finger and a small jack protruded from his hand. He connected with the computer long enough for Seed to download the records from the video cameras, then wiped the system clean and disconnected, edging past the body again before pushing open the front door half hanging from broken hinges.

His human pupil contracted while its cybernetic counterpart adjusted with an almost-silent whir and Frost strode from the motel's gloom into the muted orange of a snowy afternoon. The clouds were parted just enough to let in the setting sun. He paused to feel the warm rays on the skin of his face and neck, but mostly to look casual. Not sparing the van a glance, he lit a cigarette. He had no idea who or what was in there; better to get them back onto his turf and deal with them there. He mimicked a call on his radio, placing his hand to his ear and sending a one-way burst transmission that looked like it was going to Old Bones, but was actually going nowhere. He spoke in a voice like a brick being dragged over gravel in a burlap sack:

"He's not here; looks like he's running home to Lazlo after all. I'm heading back to Old Bones to suit up and then I'll try to cut him off before he gets there and disappears into a Rift. I'll be in touch." He passed the van as he walked back towards his nondescript hovercycle, resting nearby. With a flick of a bionic hand, a small tracer unit left his fingers to neatly stick to the van's rear axle. Frost grinned: he wasn't well-read enough to know the saying exactly, but the hunter had now become the hunted.

Frost straddled the one-man cycle, pulling an armored helmet over his head. The clear plastic of the face shield didn't obscure his vision in the slightest – the heads-up display transferred automatically to the inside plane of the helmet. He fired-up the cycle and left the van and the motel behind in a blur of acceleration, not looking back for a moment. The van stayed put – the tracer's location wasn't moving. He wondered why they would wait or listen if they were the same guys who took the kid, or tried anyway. He wished it would be that easy. One of the kidnappers was ostensibly already taken out, leaving only two deadbeats to take care of in order to get the kid

back; no problem. You couldn't be too careful, though. He needed more information. After a few moments, the distance next to the tracer's icon on his HUD stopped increasing, leveled out and then slowly began to decrease.

*That's right*, he thought. *Come and get me.*

It wasn't quite yet night when he reached the core of Old Bones. It had just stopped snowing here, the last few flakes descending gently in the dim glow of the streetlights. Brighter lights moved along the street itself, those of hovercraft, trucks and snowmobiles alongside horse-drawn sleds. They washed over him as he glided along, his watchful eye always on the distance between him and his quarry. The streets were fairly stuffed with travelers and locals alike; Frost guided his cycle off the main roads and through back alleys where the van could not follow, until he reached a series of unassuming garages. He sent a one-way scrambled burst transmission to the one labeled 'SPARTAN' and the heavy plating shuddered upwards into the façade, revealing a cold, sterile interior containing a boxy slab of a military hover vehicle resting on its jets in the center of the room.

The cycle slid up the rear ramp and attached firmly to clamps against the interior of the truck. Frost shrugged off his winter gear, tossing it into a nearby storage locker. He brought up the feed from his computer on the main terminal and instructed Seed to track the path of the tracer unit. A zigzagging line arced across the map overlay of Old Bones and terminated not three blocks away. Another grin split the grizzled face of the mercenary. It was time for some intel.

He spun his chair around, reaching up to a wall rack containing a variety of weapons and tools. Taking a baseball-sized device resembling a sensor unit in his cold metal hand, Frost opened the outer door and tossed it into the air, where it hovered about twenty feet above the ground. Its grey surface wasn't much at odds with the murk of evening in Old Bones, and the more advanced computer controlling it from the truck knew to keep its movements swift but smooth to avoid drawing attention. He sent it to observe the van and returned to the confines of the truck. Sitting back in a comfortable chair in front of the terminal, he scrutinized the feed from the drone.

Frost smoked a cigarette and watched the screen, his mind collating information and making connections almost as fast as the computer did. The drone had no offensive capabilities but its sensor package was advanced, and since it was linked to the artificial intelligence that ran Frost's own onboard computer, Seed could identify the make and model of an impressive range of hardware, along with insignia and markings corresponding to many of the local mercenary outfits. The men standing outside the van which had followed him back to Old Bones were not members of any merc company Frost was aware of – that was good. He disliked ruffling the feathers of his contemporaries when he could help it. The drone continued to stream information across his screen – they were using relatively cheap equipment, mostly Northern Gun stuff. All four of them were human – one very obviously a Juicer, going by his drug harness and twitchy movements, to say nothing of the 'born to die' graffiti scrawled across his breastplate. Frost watched as they talked amongst themselves. He didn't want the drone to get too close, but at this range the ambient noise would make it impossible to get any idea of what they were saying. Not for the first time he cursed himself for not having Mengus program Seed to lip-read.

The men finished their conversation and split into pairs. Two of the grunts went down a narrow set of stairs into a nearby bar, with the Juicer and the other man walking further up the street, away from Frost's location.

*Perfect.*

He brought up the radio, scanning certain frequencies for local support. Frost had many allies in Old Bones, mostly adventurers like him – but the problem with adventurers is that they’re frequently out adventuring. This time he was in luck. The screen lit up with an interior view of a vehicle similar to Frost’s. The disembodied voice of a young woman came across the speakers.

“Hello, Frost. I hope all is well.”

“Hey, Paige. You know how it is – one day at a time.”

With the traditional greeting between them confirmed, the artificial intelligence – so much more advanced than the one residing within Frost himself, or even the more robust AI within his vehicle – could now connect wirelessly to Frost’s database and computers. Frost lit another cigarette as he watched the feed from the drone following the two mercs.

“Is Mengus around?”

Paige was humming as she scanned through the last few hours of video Frost had recorded, bringing herself up to speed on the situation. She answered almost absentmindedly.

“Hm? Oh, yes he is. I’m not sure that you’ll want to speak to him right now, Frost.” A loud clang was followed by swearing in a deep male voice in the background. “He’s somewhat busy at the moment.”

“Don’t worry about me. Put him on – it’s important.” Frost could still hear Paige over the feed as she gently chimed in with an almost apologetic tone.

“Excuse me Mengus, but Frost is on the terminal and he’d like to speak to you. He says that it’s important. Shall I tell him to call again later?”

“What? Wait, one minute.” A moment later, a burly man with a buzz cut came stomping into view, his frame encased in stained coveralls that had clearly seen better days. His stern face was half-covered by a blonde beard but the façade cracked when he saw Frost on the screen. A wry grin crept across his face as he pulled the welding goggles from his forehead and fairly dropped into the chair in front of his terminal, resting his boots on his desk.

“What the hell do you want?”

Frost grinned back wolfishly. His Operator friend was only ever civil when he wanted something. What he usually wanted was to be back in his workshop with his arm elbow-deep up a suit of power armor.

“You’re in Old Bones.” It wasn’t a question. “I’ve been looking for Squirt around there. Got a distress call this morning – kid looks to be in trouble. I spent a few hours looking around, but I’ve picked up a tail. Just a few random mercs – don’t recognize the insignia, so they can’t be that important. I can handle it alone. I want Paige keeping tabs on me though, in case I need her to bring the thunder. I take it you two are close enough for that?” Mengus checked his terminal as he absently accepted a can of beer from a robotic arm moving about the workshop. He cracked it open with the snap-hiss of escaping carbon dioxide, foam spilling down cracked knuckles and across dirty fingernails.

“Yeah, we’re only about seven or eight miles out. To be on the safe side though, I’ll have her move in near Willy’s. That way she can cover you if she needs to, or we can come pick you up if things get hairy. I’d actually recommend that, instead of having Paige fire off a bunch of ballistic missiles just so you don’t scratch your armor.”

“Missiles flying through the air over the most populated city in the region? I don’t think the Quebec military would mind too much, do you?”

Without a trace of a smile, Mengus took another slug of his drink.

“They might.”

“You know, you could fit a particle beam in a toaster, but who knows if you’ll ever get around to upgrading that sense of humor. I’m heading out. Keep a weather eye open,” Frost said as he extinguished his cigarette and rose from his seat. “I’ll be in touch.”

He cut the transmission. Frost stood, rolling his neck and missing, as he sometimes did, the familiar crack of organic bones beneath his skin. He pulled off the remainder of his clothes, stowing them in the same locker as his winter gear. Catching a glimpse of himself in the black glass of a powered-down monitor, he thought again of the phantom sensations he’d never really lost since his conversion into a cyborg.

The reflection that stared back at him was a predatory thing. The raptor gaze of his cold blue eye and the lens of its mechanical counterpart was a microcosm for the rest of his body. Below the neck, the trunk of his torso and groin were the only flesh left to him. Matte gunmetal sheathed the synthetic fiber-bundles and components of all four bionic limbs. If he twisted in just the right way, he could feel the supports and reinforcements that reached throughout what was left of his tissues – the heavy bionics would tear the fragile body to pieces without them. What meat remained was a network of scar tissue and slabs of heavy muscle broken intermittently by dermal armor plating – what Frost liked to think of as his ‘last chance.’ As he pulled a modestly-armored thermal-masking bodysuit over his intimidating frame, light magnets on the inside of the clothing attached with a click to the hardpoints of his arms and legs. He had Seed run a quick diagnostic of his inbuilt weapon systems, cycling the concealed blasters, blades and compartments through cut-out sections of fabric. Frost didn’t like to broadcast his capabilities if he could help it. In his experience, a Partial Conversion ‘Borg’s greatest advantage was the element of surprise.

Turning back to the small armory behind him, Frost began to piece together sections of tough armor plating that snapped and hooked directly to his bionic limbs and torso through his fatigues and undersuit. He covered the cyborg espionage plate with a heavy armored trenchcoat, then selected a slim, accurate laser pistol and a cut-down ion rifle that would be easier to conceal beneath his overcoat. Lastly, he attached several grenades and spare clips to a bandolier and slung it over his shoulder, connecting it to the utility belt he wore around his waist. Tying a bandanna across his forehead to keep his hair out of his eye – and although he’d be loath to admit it, because it made him feel like a pre-Rifts hero he’d read about as a child – Frost quietly made his way back into the winter night.

The lot surrounding the garage was devoid of onlookers; Frost quickly crossed to the far side and leaped to the second story of an adjacent building in two swift bounds. The fiber-bundle muscles of his bionic legs bunched and extended, propelling him gracefully to the roof. Without pause he stalked along the rooftops, searching for the quarry he knew wasn’t too far off – the drone, still keeping tabs on the two mercs, was visible on his HUD as a distant semi-transparent glyph. He pinged the broadband.

“Paige. Take direct control of the drone – keep it hidden, but show me what’s going on over there.”

“Of course, Frost.”

The polite response of the AI preceded a small window that appeared in the corner of his HUD. The view from the drone showed the Juicer and his comrade searching the hovercycles outside of a bar, ostensibly looking for the one they had followed to Old Bones in the first place. Frost could see the sign above their heads; knew the place. He doubled his stride, dashing from building to building until he was practically on top of them, then dropped into the alley behind the establishment and pulled his pistol, along with a heavy knife. He placed his back against the wall and gave another

command, subvocal implants in his throat relaying the instructions without a sound.

“Pull the drone back and send it over to where the other mercs went – see if they’re still there. Keep an eye on things through my feed and be ready to help out if I say so. Don’t forget to jam their communications if things go sideways.”

“Of course, Frost.” As the drone left the area, Frost noticed that the men had gone into the bar. He cursed. He’d rather have taken that Juicer in an open area. It looked like he’d have to play this a bit differently. Holstering his weapons, Frost followed the two inside.

Eff Kay’s was a nasty place. Dim, smoky and filled with what sounded like a demon beating a cat to death with a guitar, courtesy of the musicians onstage; Frost could smell the violence brewing already. For the millionth time he wondered what it was that possessed adventurers and mercenaries to congregate in cesspools like this. It seemed that whenever someone told a story these days, it began with, “so we walked into a bar.” Resigning himself to the situation, he moved to a small booth near the back, taking a seat with his back to the exit and scanning the room.

Almost immediately, Paige highlighted his quarry; having cross-referenced the images from the drone against the visible faces in the bar, she ran a search against the current bounties offered by the local authorities. Frost cursed himself for not thinking of that earlier as two names appeared above their heads on his HUD and similar images cropped up in the corner of the display. Paige’s soft voice read their profiles as Frost ordered a whiskey and smoked, watching them obliquely for any sign of recognition.

“The one on the left is ‘Bones’ Donovan, a hired killer wanted for skipping out on the Body-Chop-Shop that made him into a Juicer. The bounty offered dead or alive is 20,000 – barely a tenth of what he owes. The other is ‘Smiley,’ real name unknown. He burned down an underground pharmacy and stole their drugs six months ago – they don’t expect the drugs back, but they’re offering 10,000 for anyone who can bring him in alive just in case.” Frost took a closer look at Smiley, watching the way he moved. The man’s bearing, posture, everything about him screamed familiarity.

“Ex-CS. Probably just a grunt, but definitely used to be a Dead Boy. Any luck on the other ones?”

“I’m sorry, Frost, but I don’t have sufficient image quality to run a search on the others. It doesn’t appear that these two are affiliated with any known mercenary company. They might be just operating independently,” said the AI.

Frost was unconvinced. The other mercs he’d seen before were more capable than these clowns, but his instincts told him that there was something more going on. He told the AI to jam all the communications in the bar and walked over to where the Juicer was standing. He was no fool; he knew he couldn’t simply walk up and stab the superhuman fighter – Juicers had reflexes even beyond his own, which were considerable. He also knew it would be difficult to try and take Smiley alive with a Juicer on him the whole time. He had to remove one of them from the equation before he dealt with the other. He took a circuitous route to the bar, stopping in the far corner for just a moment and subtly dropping a cylindrical object before he sidled up next to Smiley on the opposite side of the room. He watched a countdown on his HUD. Three... two... one.

When one possesses the cybernetic capability to filter sound and light at will, flash-bang charges aren’t much of a concern – especially if you’re ready for it. For most of the denizens of Eff Kay’s, it came as a bit of a surprise. Shouting and commotion filled the room as Frost dropped another grenade, this one emitting smoke. Obscured by the rapidly expanding cloud, he reached Smiley and punched him solidly in the face. A powerful taser built into his arm

scrambled the mercenary’s brain and he went limp. Frost leaped over the bar, carrying the unconscious man easily with one hand. He handcuffed both of his wrists to a pipe set into the floor and rose to his feet, switching to thermal optics to get a bead on the Juicer. A twinge on his motion detector had him half-turning as a knife drove for the back of his neck. Frost parried the attack with an elbow and then nimbly swayed aside as another blade passed within a few centimeters of his face. He jumped back, the muzzle of a weapon extending from his forearm. The particle beam cracked like thunder when it fired and the Juicer’s breastplate sizzled and smoked. Frost pulled a blade of his own, a heavy, hooked knife loosely based on an alien design he had seen years ago. He grinned. Fighting Juicers was all about knowing what you could do and what they couldn’t.

Bones came at him again, a shout on his lips. Frost easily parried the superhuman’s blade-work – it was blindingly fast but also unskilled. As he worked his way towards the door, Frost used his blade to hook one of Bones’ knives off into the corner. They moved through the smoke together – Frost wondered briefly how the hell the Juicer could even see him without a helmet. Another few steps backwards – and another of the Juicer’s knives lost to the smoke. Frost was having trouble keeping track of his opponent, despite his optics. Two hands reached out and grabbed his shoulders. Frost grimaced. This was going to hurt.

Being thrown by someone your own size is an interesting experience. They can’t just toss you like a ball – leverage and weight come into play. They have to really hurl you, like a heavy chair. Frost had the vivid sensation of spinning and then he left the smoke cloud; he cycled his vision to infrared when he saw he was sailing towards a large window about fifteen feet up on the front wall of the bar. Crashing through the glass, he landed hard on the gravel outside, rolled with the impact and came up, aiming his blaster for what he knew was coming. Bones came soaring out of the window a moment later, legs tucked underneath him, pistol in hand. Frost watched the reticle line up on the superman’s head, tracked him as he landed not five feet away. Frost exhaled, looking directly into the other man’s eyes, the face twisted with anger and chemicals. He fired. Even at point-blank range, Bones managed to juke ever so slightly to the left, but not nearly enough. The Juicer’s wrathful expression – along with his entire face – simply disappeared. Not exploded, not burst; just there one second and gone the next in a flash of charged particles. The body dropped almost too fast, like a puppet with its strings cut. Frost inhaled, sheathed his knife and retracted the blaster back into his arm. Walking over to the corpse, he grabbed a leg and dragged it back inside.

The bar was surprisingly orderly when he re-entered. Chatter dominated the room. The smoke had mostly cleared, thanks in part to the broken window and a ventilation system built for patrons’ cigars and cigarettes. A few rough-looking types stood up when Frost walked in, shaking glass out of his hair and grimacing. They quickly sat back down when they observed the decapitated Juicer he pulled over to the bar. Smiley was still handcuffed there, unconscious. Frost activated his radio:

“Paige, get my truck over here; I’ve got something to drop off. Then take me back to the garage.”

“Of course, Frost,” came the predictable reply. Frost dropped a hundred credits on the bar, ignoring the glare of the bartender.

“That ought to cover the window.”

Outside, with Smiley lying underneath the dead weight of the Juicer on the ground next to him, Frost lit a cigarette as he waited. An ETA ticked by in the corner of his field of vision as he pulled the smoke into his artificial lungs and exhaled heavily into the night air. As the clock wound down, he shouldered the carcass and gave

a swift kick to the man on the ground. Smiley groaned as he opened his eyes, still disoriented. Frost had cuffed his hands behind his back and now pulled him up by his wrists, eliciting another groan. As the vehicle glided along the street towards them, the hatch opened and Frost jumped into the rear compartment, carrying both men with ease. The hatch closed and the van smoothly kept moving, now headed back to base.

Frost dumped Bones' body on the floor, noting he'd probably have to wipe down that spot later as the stump of the Juicer's neck left a dark red smudge on the brushed metal. He opened one of the small cages along the far wall, shoving Smiley into it. When the mercenary made eye contact with him, Frost resisted the urge to smile. Instead, a needle protruded from his wrist and he shot the man full of tranquilizer – enough to keep him occupied for the next few hours while he attended to other things. Smiley made a protesting noise as the syringe slid into his neck, but quickly subsided as he fell back into the corner of the cage, head lolling. Frost watched him closely for a few seconds until Seed advised him the drugs had taken effect. He sat down in front of the terminal again and called Mengus, this time directly. The voice of his friend crackled over the audio feed.

“What is it?”

“I've taken care of those mercs. The Juicer is dead and one of the others is here with me. He'll be out cold for the next few hours, won't be causing any problems. I need more information – something's going on here.”

“What do you mean? It's not like hackers don't make enemies.”

“This is more than just another team trying to get a hold of Squirt. This is personal. Take a look at the vid log from a few minutes ago – that Juicer wanted to kill me for a reason.”

“Wouldn't be the first time someone wanted to kill you too, Frost.”

“I know – I still take it personally. It's a failing of mine.”

Mengus chuckled. “Not the first of those either. Want me to suit up?”

“Not just yet. If it comes down to it, we can handle two mercs even without Gladys and Rosemary. Just keep Paige's eyes and ears open and I'll be there soon.”

“Roger.” The feed disconnected.

When the truck pulled into the garage once more, it might well have been entering a completely different building. What had appeared to be separate units from the exterior were revealed to be merely elements of a whole. The interior walls had pulled into the ceiling, leaving an open space large enough for the two trucks and much more. Frost pulled up next to the other vehicle. He moved to the rear compartment and opened Smiley's cage. The mercenary was half-lying against the wall, hands still behind his back. A thin line of drool connected his face to the cold, steel floor and his pupils were the size of dinner plates. Frost picked him up over his shoulder and dragged the carcass of the Juicer into the main garage. He dropped the body and continued along, speaking as he walked.

“Paige, lower the thermostat; we wouldn't want this body stinking up the place.”

“Of course, Frost.” Almost immediately, Frost's HUD showed a slow but steady decrease in temperature. He shouldered Smiley's weight across his shoulder again and kept walking.

At one end of the room, Mengus sat at a terminal against the wall. His hands flew across the keyboard with a speed and accuracy that belied their size and strength. One set of calloused fingers were accompanied by a bulky but still dextrous bionic appendage. Frost remembered when Mengus had lost his left hand – an altogether silly incident with a Wired Gunslinger a year or so ago. It had taken

him months to grow accustomed to the phantom pain and the vague feeling of something being missing; Frost knew those feelings well. A memory began to surface, a shadow from many years ago...

*The grenade clutched in his hand, wide eyes staring into his...*

Frost pushed it aside before it could fully develop. There was no time for reminiscing right now; too many things still needed to be done. He stopped next to Mengus, taking a cursory look at the screen the Operator was working on.

The display was a composite of several images – lines of code that Frost couldn't be bothered to figure out at the moment alongside video feeds from the drone, Frost's vehicle and Frost's own cybernetic eye. Mengus spoke without looking up.

“Nice moves out there. I can't remember the last time I saw you take down a Juicer so easy.”

Frost chuckled. “It wasn't just moves. He was a hothead – like I said, he really wanted me dead. When you care that much, you start making mistakes. That's all.”

Mengus skipped through the eye-video feed to the moment when Frost had gone through the window. Frost grimaced as he watched the spiraling view of the inside of Eff Kay's through thermal optics switch over to an infrared perspective of the outside. As the camera whipped back to the broken window and the particle beam came into frame to align with the targeting reticle, Mengus paused again.

“That's another thing. You started aiming before the Juicer came through the window. How'd you know he wouldn't stay inside, or use the door?”

As the video played, Frost watched himself line up his shot. Just before the blast was fired, Frost leaned over and paused the playback. The Juicer's face filled the window, contorted and furious.

“Bones was predictable; most Crazies and Juicers are. Give 'em a door or a window fifteen feet up and they'll leap through it every time.” He gestured to the display. “What I'm interested in is this. Why the hell was he so angry? What's on the board for me right now – anybody looking to collect on this handsome face?”

Mengus shrugged. “Paige, search the bounty and wanted listings for Frost. Me too, while you're at it.”

“Of course, Mengus.” Another window appeared alongside the hateful visage of the dead Juicer. “I'll cross-reference these Old Bones postings with Lazlo and Ishpeming – those are the most recent updates I've received.” The window began to show a list, growing steadily. Mengus clicked on the first result. An image expanded to fill the screen. Frost, face locked in a scowl, held a knife to a kneeling man's head as he pointed at a group of other men with a forearm blaster. The man on his knees was grossly fat and appeared to be crying, but it was hard to tell in the grain of the picture. The image was taken by some sort of security camera – it must've been some time ago, by the look of it. Mengus did a bit of a double-take.

“Is that Mal?”

“Yeah,” Frost grinned. “He tried to double-cross me over... something, I don't remember. I held off his goons until they threw down their weapons, then I dropped some tear gas and dove out of a third-story window. That was months ago. Anything more recent?”

A few more images flicked across the screen. Frost, looking directly into the camera as he shouted something. Mengus, aiming a rifle at something off-camera. Frost, face set in a scowl again, a pistol and knife clutched in his grip. Another of him lighting a cigarette outside of Willy's bar –

Frost felt a peculiar cold sensation move down his bionic spine. He knew who was after him. He glanced at Smiley, sitting on the ground beside him. It would be a few more hours until he was lucid enough to answer any questions. By that time, the other mercs would realize their comrades were gone and he might lose them.

He had to deal with this now. He strode away from the terminal, heading towards his truck. Mengus turned, only now noticing the drugged soldier on the floor.

“What the hell do I do with him? Frost? Where are you going?” Frost’s broad back provided no answers as he entered the truck, the ramp closing shut behind him. Mengus shrugged again. “Paige, keep an eye on him from the truck, send a drone too, and send all the feeds to this terminal and my wrist computer. Make sure Gladys is ready for me to jump into. Frost is right; something weird is going on – but *he’s* acting strange, too. I don’t like it.”

Of course, the bar the other two mercenaries had investigated was Willy’s. Frost should have known. He was a regular there, and his arrangement with the owner was simple – pay for any damages or take it outside. Other than that, there were no stipulations. Frost still felt somewhat responsible to the owner. Willy had a hard enough time as a D-Bee trying to make a living in Old Bones without his place being trashed every couple of weeks. Aliens had to take a lot of crap from the local law enforcement, not to mention the human-power gangs. He’d have to do this the hard way.

The truck pulled up next to the back entrance. Frost climbed out, knocking the secret code in quick succession, activating the locking mechanism Mengus had installed for their comrade years ago. Opening the door, he swept inside along with a blast of night air as his alien friend rushed to meet him in the back. The D-Bee gestured him inside, but kept him in the corridor. Willy’s facial tentacles twitched, he shut the door behind them; traffic noise and wind replaced by the sound of muffled carousing coming from the main bar. His three hands kneaded a rag in their fingers. He was nervous. Frost gave a small, tight smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Willy? Somebody looking for me again?”

“Frost! My friend, you’re always one step ahead of what’s going on. Two guys came in a little while ago, said they were friends of yours. They’ve been waiting for you.”

“So what’s got you so nervous, then?” Frost asked. Willy continued to knead his hands.

“I’m not sure, but I got a feeling they’re CS. They haven’t said anything, but... I don’t need this kind of exposure, Frost.”

Frost knew that Willy got feelings about people sometimes; it was a flimsy excuse for whatever modicum of psychic power the alien possessed. Frost himself sometimes had difficulty explaining the hunches he would get when holding an item belonging to someone – flashes of insight he would normally have no way of knowing. More likely, though, was that Willy just wanted to keep a low profile. Having some Dead Boys in his bar must have felt like waiting for a hammer to fall for the short, beige, spongy-looking, octopoid D-Bee. Frost laid a bionic hand on Willy’s second shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it. Go out and tell everybody it’s last call. I’ll watch the Dead Boys and see if they make a move. If they leave, then I’ll take them outside. If they stay, then get to the basement and hide there while I handle them.”

“If you say so, Frost,” the alien replied, sounding unconvinced.

It took him a moment to check out the exterior again. He followed his tracer back to the mercs’ vehicle, keeping an eye on them through the window with the drone. He took the tracer off, sliding it back into his arm, where it silently recharged alongside the rest. Replacing it with another device on the underside of the craft, he walked back to Willy’s. The supposed Dead Boys hadn’t moved from their seats, although the drone still wasn’t able to get a clear look at their faces. Frost sent the machine back to watch the vehicle, entered through the front door and moved to the bar. Willy had evidently made last call: most of the patrons were either finishing drinks and moving on, or nursing them and waiting to be kicked

out into the chilly night. Back against the wood of the bartop, Frost watched the two men he had come here for. As Paige began scanning the relevant databases for their likenesses, he took in details.

They were unaugmented – at least they appeared so. Both were of medium height and build inside their body armor – they didn’t look out of sorts wearing it indoors, which meant they were probably pros – very nondescript. It was easy to spot the one in charge – the other seemed deferential towards him, looking to him for cues when he wasn’t keeping an eye out. Frost could see the telltale body language of Coalition military training, even as they sat. Willy was right – these were at least former Dead Boys. He decided to let the game develop as it would. He approached the table. The subordinate noticed him coming and said something under his breath to his commander, whose back was still to Frost. To Frost’s enhanced hearing, he might as well have shouted.

“He’s here,” was the whisper. There was no reply. Frost sat down opposite the commander. When their eyes met, Frost’s blood went as cold as his namesake. Staring back at him was a face he would have known anywhere, should have known even from the grainy image of the surveillance drone. It was a face he had eaten with and fought beside, a face he had trusted and that had trusted him. It was a face he had thought was long dead.

“Hello, Sarge. Long time,” said the face. “I heard that you come here often. Thought we could have a drink for old times’ sake.”

Frost had plenty of experience concealing his emotions. In his line of work, he had seen things that would make lesser men weep. Even facing certain death, Frost had stood behind his cold, blue gaze; it was how he earned his name as a child. Now he struggled to maintain that icy glare. The face before him smiled, but not as a friend.

“Bet you never thought you’d see me again.”

“It’s not often you see a dead man walking,” said Frost, his face still set in stone. “You died in my arms, Luke.”

“Probably looked that way; I thought I was dead, too. But here I am, talking with ex-Sergeant Rand Deacon, formerly of the Coalition Army. Deserter. Traitor. How’ve you been, Frost?”

Frost lit a cigarette, eyeing the junior soldier for a moment. The man sitting with Luke was obviously a grunt, but the fact that he was in Old Bones suggested there might be more to him – the CS didn’t send just anybody on intel missions this deep outside of their territory. He was green; sitting ramrod straight, drink going warm in his hand and his eyes analyzing the exchange happening before him. Unlike Luke, who seemed somewhat relaxed despite the tension in the air, the rookie’s dark eyes continually flicked back and forth between his superior and Frost. The young man was fresh-faced, with that look of blind devotion Frost expected from most young CS troops. He had one hand below the table, but when the Headhunter glanced at him he quickly brought it up empty to nurse his drink with both palms. Luke noticed this, too.

“This is Clem. He’s green, obviously, but he’s got the right stuff. Remind you of anyone?” At his superior’s words, the young soldier sat up a little straighter.

“I suppose he does. You beat that proper posture into him, or did he come with his own?”

“That’s all him,” Luke replied. “I lost mine years ago.” He leaned forward, steepling his armored fingers in front of his chest. “Shall we drop the small talk?”

“Sure.”

“Okay then. I’m sure you’re wondering why we’re here.”

Frost chuckled, hoping it didn’t sound forced.

“Not really. You’re looking for Squirt – at least you were, until you found me.”



Luke shook his head. The smirk on his face mirrored the one Frost was maintaining.

“The hack rat? No, Frost. I came here for you. The kid was just to flush you out into the open. I didn’t expect you to run back to Old Bones so fast and disappear on me. You’ve really submerged yourself into this cesspool, haven’t you? Consorting with D-Bees and wizards, cyber-snatching, even the occasional melee with Army forces; it’s all a matter of record, for anyone who cares to look and has the authorization.”

“I take it you do?”

“I better. Otherwise, what’s the point of being a Lieutenant in Special Forces?”

Mengus breathed out as he heard the words over Frost’s audio feed. Special Forces. Coalition troops in Old Bones, looking for them. Well, looking for Frost – but Frost and Mengus had been traveling together a long time now; they hadn’t exactly been discerning in the company they kept, either. At least, not in the eyes of the Coalition. He threw a quick glance to the back of his truck, where his power armor was waiting. This deep in the center of Old Bones, he’d be dead meat flying around in a SAMAS. He’d have to play it closer to the chest.

Frost’s van had a veritable armory in back with tools for every job. Mengus, on the other hand, preferred multi-taskers. He began to pull on a suit of heavy Triax body armor, painted a dark gray, rattling off what he liked to call a ‘shopping list’ to Paige.

“Paige, I’ll be needing my variable frequency laser rifle, NG-45 pistol, smoke, frag and plasma grenades, a Vibro-Knife and three reloads for both of the guns.”

“Of course, Mengus.”

Robotic arms began to move throughout the bay of the truck, assembling holsters and a bandolier with the weapons Mengus had requisitioned. Just seconds later, as he pulled the featureless helmet down over his face, the arms handed him the guns and belt. The helmet clicked into place and the circular apertures of the exterior eyes cycled open. The world reappeared, superimposed with a HUD that indicated the integrity of his suit and all manner of tactical overlays. He wondered, as he had before, if this is how Frost felt all the time; the optics package of this suit was modeled after the systems in the Headhunter’s cybernetic eye.

Mengus ran a systems check, cycling through the various spectrums of light and testing his multi-optics. The arms continued to hold out the holsters and gun belt, waiting. Paige, looking through his eyes, identified the make and model of each weapon, noting that zero shots had been fired from either gun. He strapped them on and moved to a smaller workbench, grabbing a personal computer that he slipped into a dock on the forearm of his armor. He was ready.

“Paige, head to the rear of Willy’s bar, and keep it quiet – but hurry.”

“Of course, Mengus.”

When Willy’s human waitress brought their next round of drinks, her face showed the tension surrounding the table. Luke held up his hand as she poured out more whiskey.

“Leave the bottle.”

The girl left quickly and they took a drink. Frost smirked. It was interesting what being able to see in multiple spectrums of light showed you about a person. The young soldier with Luke was not used to hard drinking – it showed in the flush of heat across his cheeks, maybe even in what Frost might have called his ‘aura’ if it were a function of his meager psychic powers rather than the machines in his head. At any rate, the young military specialist would make more mistakes the more he drank, so Frost kept him drinking.

He had already made sure to filter all the alcohol out of his system – the coils of cybernetic intestine in his gut were so efficient that he could live off grass and dirt if he wanted to – so it would only prove an advantage to keep the whiskey flowing. Luke didn’t seem to think it strange, with good reason; even when Frost had been whole, when they had first known each other, he had a predilection to drink too much and too often.

The Coalition State of Lone Star was, for the most part, an unforgiving wasteland. The CS might have laid claim to the entire region, but besides the military facility that was the namesake of the state, the majority of the territory belonged to the bandit kingdom of the Pecos Empire. Frost had been a part of the 107<sup>th</sup> Battalion back then, and in command of a small unit. The whole detachment was known for its brutal first strikes against raiders in the region, Frost and his squad more so than most. A young sergeant at the time, Frost and his men had operated at the fringe of Coalition civilization. The life they led was conducive to hard drinking at border towns, interspersed with the adrenaline of combat and the boredom of reconnaissance. Luke had been his corporal – the only two literate soldiers in the unit; every member of the squad had the battalion’s heraldry tattooed on their upper arms, but they were the only ones who could read it. Those had been times of brotherhood, of shared terror and triumph, but they had come to an all-too sudden close. The last time Frost had seen his former corporal, it had been holding his hand while he was dying – one of the last things he had seen as a Coalition soldier.

It had been Frost’s third year in Lone Star – his second year as a sergeant. He had taken to command easily, perhaps because of the quality of his soldiers, perhaps a selection of natural talents. Luke had been his right hand, his point man, and they had been watching each other’s backs for years; they were two of the three original squad members. A reconnaissance mission had brought them to the ragged edge of CS territory, slowly moving on foot through a canyon back to their rendezvous point a few hours’ march away. A well-placed ambush by Pecos raiders had killed more than half the squad before any of them had any idea what was happening. A protracted firefight killed most of the rest. After Luke had succumbed to his wounds, Frost had made his decision. In order to save the last of his boys, their guns almost dry and the taste of defeat in their mouths, he would have to do something drastic. He remembered the feel of the grenade against the skin of his palm...

“I’m sorry, Sarge. Am I distracting you from your memories?”

Frost shook himself mentally. The phantom pain receded into recall again, but his bionic right hand clenched reflexively for a moment. He reminded himself that had been a long time ago, that he was a different person now. Frost reminded himself that this man was now, for all intents and purposes, his enemy. He smirked again and poured out another drink for all of them.

“You know me; I always get sentimental when I drink.”

Luke rolled his eyes to Clem and gestured to the Headhunter with an armored hand.

“You know, this man right here used to be my commander. We had some good times, huh Frost? Lone Star might have been a hell-hole, but we were putting in our time as rat catchers for the border patrol before moving on to bigger and better things. At least, I was. The sergeant here decided to look for the bottom of every bottle he could when we weren’t on a mission – and he usually found it. Of course,” he said as he took another shot himself before refilling their glasses, “the thing about that is, you actually start to figure out drinking is a skill like anything else. It can be learned, practiced. It might have been the thing Frost was best at; besides scowling, that is.”

Frost didn't scowl. He continued to smirk. Subvocally, he asked Seed how drunk these two were. A moment later, after a brief analysis of word slurring and pupil dilation, along with an improvised breathalyzer test from the air between them, the artificial intelligence advised that both of the soldiers were reasonably intoxicated. Frost's grin grew wider. He looked Luke in the eye and spoke, slurring his words just enough to sound believable and ignoring the young soldier by his side as he poured the last of the bottle.

"Just 'cause you couldn't never hold your liquor doesn't mean I was – is some kind of drunk jerk. Luke, what in the hell are you doing out here? You're Special Forces now, I get that. This must be recon then, right? You and the kid all done up in Northern Gun gear, all inconspicuous like. Why would you be looking for me, after all these years? Need a helping hand from a Headhunter on your recon gig? Well I already gave you a hand, kid. I gave you a hand years back," he flexed his bionics meaningfully, "and I'll give you a tip, too – get lost. I don't deal with Dead Boys these days." He sat back and lit a cigarette. Luke stared, obviously angry now. The whiskey was behind his eyes, just boiling up with his hate, his sadness, and most of all his sense of perceived betrayal. He spoke softly, his voice thin with rage.

"You think this is business, Frost? You think I'm showing up because I need a bounty hunter to show me how to get to Iron Heart all safe and sound? You stupid prick. This is personal. Believe it or not, you've been on my to-do list all these years – you've just been hard to pin down until you settled here in Old Bones. Imagine my surprise when a standard recon mission checking out some start-up merc company turns you up."

"So you were looking into Happy Endings and you found me. What happens now? We hug, we fight, we argue, we get drunk – I can't think of anything else. What is it you want from me, Luke?"

"I want to know why you're a major player in this merc outfit, Frost. I want to know why you're part of this. Happy Ending Solutions is packed full of magic-users and non-humans and everything you were supposed to stand against. I hate you for leaving us, Frost. You abandoned the unit, you abandoned the CS, and you abandoned me. But that's not the reason I'm gonna kill you. You leaked info to the Pecos about our operations in Lone Star after you left. Men and women, Coalition patriots, died because of that. I've been looking for you, my boys have been looking for you, and now we have you. It's gonna be a long ride back to CS territory, Frost. I hope you're ready." Luke stood, with Clem following his lead. Frost braced himself, tensing his legs. This was it.

"You don't want to do this Luke. You can leave now, nice and easy, but you keep going the way you're going and you won't like what happens next." Now it was Luke's turn to smirk.

"Whatever you say, Sarge." He reached for his pistol.

Frost bunched the synthetic bundles of his legs and flipped backwards, leaving a smoke grenade in his place. The Dead Boys pulled on their helmets before the choking cloud could affect them. Frost drew his heavy knife, the particle beam sliding out of his bionic forearm at the same time. He nimbly dodged aside as a laser pulse burned the air where his torso had been a moment earlier; if he wasn't sure they had multi-optics on those helmets before, he was now. He grimaced.

*New plan.*

He lunged towards Clem, snapping off a shot at Luke as he passed by. The blast hit the lieutenant's shoulder guard and knocked him back a step as Frost closed on his subordinate. He slapped the palm of his free hand against the chest plate of Clem's armor, leaving behind a small disc. The rookie looked down and despite his helmet, it seemed that Frost could almost see the look of confusion on his

face just before the rocket fired. The powerful charge lifted the soldier directly out the window behind him before twisting randomly upwards and away; Frost lost sight of him after that, and turned to face Luke again in time to catch a laser pulse across his chest. The beam scorched the bionic armor he wore and Frost smelled ozone.

"So who're the other two, Luke? Special Forces? They didn't fight like it. I hope you're not expecting backup." He closed on the lieutenant and flicked his pistol away with a swift pull of the knife. "Cause it ain't coming."

"You murderer," Luke huffed in return as he pulled a knife of his own, driving it for the Headhunter's face, "you killed my men!"

"Not all of them. The Juicer was just plain unreasonable; had to go," Frost said, parrying the slash with a bionic forearm and firing his particle beam again. The blast went wide as Luke juked to his left. A large section of Willy's east wall vanished, letting the cold night air into the quickly-depopulating bar.

"And Smiley? What'd you do with him?"

"He's your local undercover along with Bones, isn't he? You should've told him not to reek of CS, he might not be chained up right now." Frost dodged another slash, this time taking the knife away with his own. Luke reeled back and pulled another pistol from a shoulder holster, a non-standard issue particle beam number. Then he pulled another. Frost grimaced again. "Three guns? You're as paranoid as ever, Luke."

"Funny. That Juicer was your last squad member, you cold bastard. Johnny got the conversion to work undercover – after he'd gotten the surgery to erase his face. He must've hated you at least as much as I do, because he came running as soon as I told him we found you. This is for him, for me, for the CS!"

He fired.

The rear ramp to the truck was just beginning to lower when Mengus heard a loud slam against the thick armor of the roof. Paige's voice chimed onto the radio; at the same time, the vid feed from the pintle-mounted rail gun swivelled to show a man in body armor lying on the metal surface, prone and dazed.

"Mengus, I'm afraid there's a man in body armor lying on top of us." Mengus rolled his eyes inside his helmet.

"Thank you, Paige. Any idea how he got there," he asked, "or should I assume somebody dropped him from the building?"

"Well, I do see one of Frost's combat charges on his chest. He's getting up now, Mengus."

"Shoot him." Mengus backed out of the vehicle down the ramp, tracking up with his laser rifle. The soldier was indeed rising, pulling a rifle of his own out of a heavy leather holster across his back. As soon as he could draw a bead on the man, Mengus fired a burst and then backed away further from the vehicle. He headed for cover as the rail gun tracked to the same target. His pulse of laser beams had scorched into the armor protecting the man's back. The man's reaction was immediate, his rifle snapping towards Mengus. Mengus' HUD flickered as a single shot rocked his head backwards, but he still saw the burst of rail gun rounds slam into the crouched soldier now that his back was turned to the turret.

Mengus called up a radar image of the area, hoping he'd have some notice if troops were moving into the area to investigate the firefight. Sure enough, what appeared to be a pair of flying power armor troopers were headed towards their location. He barked for an ETA and a small countdown was superimposed over the radar image; just under three minutes. He cursed. Abruptly, the vid feed from the turret's camera went black – leaning around the corner, Mengus could see the gun swivelling back and forth, sparks spurring from the sensors. The soldier was nowhere to be seen. Mengus continued to back away from Paige towards the gaping hole in the

wall of Willy's bar, hoping he could get behind some cover in the rubble while he searched the area. He tracked left to right with his rifle, straining for a glimpse of his opponent. Seeing nothing, he glanced into the bar and narrowly missed sticking his face into another particle beam. He cursed again as he ducked back and pressed a button on his gauntlet.

A handful of observation balls, small metallic probes he had packed with sensors, exited a small hatch on the side of the truck, the small devices being shot into the air before hovering away of their own accord. Mengus told Paige to set up a perimeter and find the other soldier while she was at it. A small display in the corner of his HUD rotated between the small hovering sensors' perspectives before settling on a view of the inside of the bar. It looked like Frost had his hands full trading fire with the Dead Boy from the other side of the room.

"Frost, I'm making my way over to you. Coming across from your right to flank this guy," he advised. He moved discreetly between the patches of cover, but he was only halfway to the flanking position when Frost's tense growl came on the channel.

"Negative. If they have the kid, then I'm gonna have to take at least one of 'em alive; preferably the leader. Not sure if the one back at base knows anything." He ducked his head back as another blast slipped by him out the open side of the building. "Is the other one dead?" Mengus stopped moving, turning back to the vehicle.

"No. I think he might've run off, though. Listen, we got SAMAS inbound, coming to check out the light show. Or maybe our Dead Boys have pals." A virtual flick and he shared the countdown to Frost's eye.

Mengus went back to sweep his rifle across the outside again, consulting the map his probes had constructed on their HUDs for the surrounding area. There was nothing – no movement, nothing on infrared or thermals. He moved back to Paige, backing slowly towards the vehicle. He heard Frost's voice again, and could practically hear his scowl through the radio.

"Keep an eye out for the other Dead Boy, too. He might even be heading to where the kid is. I'll take this one down alive."

Frost was getting tired of this. Every moment he spent pinned down was a moment closer to those power armored reinforcements arriving. He needed to take the fight to Luke. It occurred to him that Luke would be expecting him to fight like a soldier – maybe playing this like a superman would be better. He leaned out of cover, lobbing a handful of smaller pellets that burst in a row, creating a wall of optics-scrambling chaff between him and the Dead Boy. Closing the aperture of his cybernetic eye, Frost took a running leap over the wall of smoke, mirroring the tucked-leg form of the Juicer formerly known as Johnny. His human vision stung from the chemicals of the gas, but even with the blurred, teary vision, Frost could tell that it had worked. Clearing the top edge of the cloud, he landed with Luke's back to him as the Dead Boy faced the scrambling chaff, his multi-optics useless. Luke had barely spun on his heel to the sound of Frost landing as the Headhunter leapt again. Pulling an elongated wedge-like device from his belt, Frost flung it at his former comrade as he rolled backwards to get his feet under him for a charge.

The 'bad day' was a gizmo Mengus had tinkered together after a few too many 'dead body discount' bounties. Frost had started taking more and more contracts alive if possible, netting more credits – but it was proving more difficult with the crazier ones who didn't know when to quit. The Operator had designed the 'bad day' for just such an occasion. As Luke turned, the wedge spun out of the Headhunter's hand and split in half mid-flight, a cable connecting the two heavy end pieces. As they passed by either side of the Dead Boy, powerful magnets in the tips brought them back together on

the other side and the cable went taut. The first effect of this was to knock Luke on his armored butt. The second was that a tiny motor in each end retracted the cable, tightening the grip around Luke's arms and pinning them to his sides. He sprawled on the ground, dazed for a moment. It was all the time Frost needed.

He swiftly crossed to Luke and knelt next to him, scanning for tracking devices. The guns came up hot, so he kicked them away and started to drag the soldier out to the van. He tore off Luke's helmet. The man was dazed, but coherent enough to stare at Frost with a venom that was palpable. He opened his mouth to say something but before he could get a word out, Frost slid a needle from his mechanical wrist into Luke's neck and tranquilized him, at which point his former corporal fell silent. Frost hauled him out of the ruined pub.

Before he reached the ramp of Mengus' vehicle, he felt a snippet of movement from his motion detector. Frost began to turn just as a voice barked over the external speaker of a suit of armor.

"Put him down, Frost. Step away." The rookie stepped out from behind cover, the barrel of his rifle pointed squarely at Frost's head. Frost considered his options. The rookie's gun never wavered. "Right now!"

"Okay, kid." He lowered Luke to the dirty snow of the street, the lieutenant's head slack. As he laid the soldier on the ground, he began to reach for something on his bandolier. A pulse of laser fire raked the ground in front of him.

"Don't even think about it. I've had enough of your gadgets, traitor. Get on the ground. Hands behind your back." Clem moved forward a bit. "Or just give me a reason to shoot you. Doesn't matter to me." Frost saw something in the corner of his HUD.

"Kid, this ain't gonna go your way. Trust me."

"I'm not a kid. I am a Coalition soldier. A defender of humanity, like you used to be before you turned your back on your people. You're..."

A burst of lasers hit the Dead Boy from behind. He dropped, armor destroyed and useless. Frost grinned as Mengus appeared from cover, still tracking the fallen soldier with his pulse rifle.

*Yep. Juicers like to leap through windows, and true believers like to talk. Predictable.*

The Operator's featureless helm hid his excitement; the voice that chimed over the radio was full of adrenaline.

"Haha! Now you owe me one." He kept moving, kicking the Dead Boy's gun away with an armored foot. Frost's grin became mockingly skeptical.

"You think so?" Frost picked up Luke again, who groaned faintly. "We keeping track?"

"Why not?"

"Cause if we are, I'm still ahead by three."

Luke and Smiley were coming around. Frost swilled back the last of his beer, belched, then crushed the can and threw it at the lieutenant. The chunk of aluminum ricocheted off of Luke's head, hitting Smiley in the face. Frost chuckled, a dark sound.

"Wakey wakey, boys." The two Dead Boys were groaning, their eyes still screwed shut. The animal tranquilizer had hit them pretty hard. They were each tied to a heavy chair, bolted to the floor of Frost's safe house. Mengus wasn't there; the Operator had returned to Willy's bar to pay off the damages. Besides, Mengus had never really cared much for interrogation.

Harsh white light shone on the two soldiers from a small but intense lamp sitting behind Frost. The Headhunter had done this before – the lamp was cued to a small control he held in his hand. He brought the light level down, letting Luke and Smiley open their eyes somewhat. As they peered across at him – their bleary, sweaty

and shaking faces betraying their fear – Frost quickly turned the light back up. The two cried out in pain. He laughed again.

“Yeah, I imagine that isn’t much fun. You boys just waking up and here I come with this pesky little light. Tell you what, I’ll turn it down again.” He did. “Is that better?”

“You’re still a traitor.” Smiley’s first words to the mercenary. Frost didn’t really blame him. He’d sucker-punched him in the face, tazed him, then tranqed him up – twice – and all before they’d even exchanged names. Nevertheless, it wasn’t good practice to allow that kind of attitude in a proper interrogation. He switched the lamp to a fast strobe. The two men groaned again.

“Now, that isn’t any way to speak to the man who holds your lives in his hands, is it? Also, I hold the control for this light in my hand – so you might want to be a bit more polite. Who knows, you do good and I might even let you live long enough to collect the bounty on your head. How’s that sound?” He turned down the light again, the strobe coming very slowly and the light dimming considerably. The Dead Boys looked at him again. Luke stared him right in the eye.

“I ain’t gonna tell you nothin’, scum. I got nothin’ to say to you. Neither of us do.” He tried to spit, but had almost no saliva in his mouth – it came out as a sound more than anything else. “You’re wasting your time.”

“Don’t speak too soon, Luke,” said Frost, “because Smiley here might make a deal for the info I want – maybe the info I want is even worth the twenty grand I could get for turning him in. You, on the other hand; you got nothin’ to bargain with, brother. Why don’t you try sitting there and thinking about what you can offer me to let you live, while Smiley and I talk for a while.” He stood and tied a gag around the back of the lieutenant’s head.

Frost let his boots echo as he walked purposefully around behind the chair Luke was bound to. Taking a black cloth bag from his belt, he pulled it down over Luke’s head. Muffled cries escaped the bag as he tightened the bottom cinch securely, the covered head jerking from side to side as Luke tried to shake it off. Smiley just stared, breathing hard, then groaned when he saw Frost pull the other bag and reach for him. Frost chuckled, but a smile didn’t cross his lips. He didn’t particularly enjoy some of this, but he had to play his part.

Tipping the back of the chair towards him, he easily dragged Luke to the bathroom across the stained, cold floor of the dingy industrial unit. Frost backed out of the room, rewarded with the sight of Smiley shaking as he listened to the slight rasp of metal on stone. The metal legs of the chair left faint lines scratched in the smooth concrete. A single long, white bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered on as he hit the switch; the buzzing of the old, greenish-tinged fluorescent light set a fitting score to the small legion of cockroaches that scattered away into the new, smaller shadows. Luke was breathing hard – he was still very disoriented, which was the major reason Frost didn’t want to go to work on him yet. He knew he would probably need to kill Luke later that night, and Frost wasn’t going to take his life before he got the chance to explain himself to his... to his friend. He stood behind Luke, opened his mouth to speak. No. Now wasn’t the time to get distracted; he had things to do.

Smiley was still shaking when Frost came back. Loosening the string around the neck, he roughly pulled the bag away. Smiley looked up, scowling.

“So what now, torture? Go ahead. I trained for this sort of thing.”

“Oh, damn.” Frost reached into his fatigues, producing a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He shook one out and lit it, trying to look disappointed. “You trained for this? You must be a real expert, then. Although seeing as how you’re supposed to be the undercover for this unit, I hope whoever trained you to resist torture ain’t the same

as whoever trained you to blend in. You’re so CS I can see your skull showing.” He leaned in closer, smoke exhaling from both nostrils as he spoke. “Let me tell you something, Dead Boy. You never trained for me.”

“Luke was right about you, traitor. You’ll help magic-users, terrorists and freaks, even aliens and monsters. Now you’ll even torture your own kind. You’re one of them.” He seemed to realize his mistake as he said it. “No–”

The sound cut off as Frost lifted him bodily into the air, chair and all, with one bionic arm. He had Smiley’s throat in a vice grip. It would be so easy to just squeeze. Paige’s voice in his ear broke through his anger as he watched Smiley’s face.

“I’m sorry, Frost, but if you continue to hold him like that he will die.” He breathed out, growling out his next words as he set the man back down.

“That’s the last time you call me a traitor today. You don’t know me. Even Luke might think he knows what went down all those years ago, but he doesn’t know anything. You answer my questions and keep Prosek’s opinions to yourself. Got it?” Smiley was coughing, rasping air in and out of his raw throat in between fits. Tears stood in his eyes. He nodded.

“Good.” Frost took a seat again. “Here’s how this is going to go. You tell me where you got the kid stashed, I let you go. You don’t tell me, I collect the twenty grand being offered for you. I go to your place, take everything you own and sell it. Even if they leave you alive, you got nothing. You have one shot to get out of this. Hell, the CS might even take you back if you’re smart and don’t tell them you told me anything.”

“So I tell you what you want to know, you don’t turn me over for the bounty?”

“That’s my offer, but you better believe that if you give me the wrong info, or send my guys into a trap, your situation gets a lot worse. Do we understand each other?”

“I get you.” He paused, seeming to consider his situation. Smiley’s eyes lowered from Frost’s glare. His voice softened from the painful rasp to a nervous whisper. “Are you gonna kill the LT?”

“Probably,” Frost replied. “He’s not the sort of guy to just let things go. There’s only one way I can think of that’ll keep him off me permanently. Can you handle that?” Frost paused expectantly, looking Smiley in the eye. He recognized the glint of the opportunist in the bound man’s gaze. A mercenary waiting to be born. The instinct for self-preservation; even if he let Luke live, Smiley would disappear as long as he didn’t find out his commander was alive. He’d be a merc by the end of the week, run-and-gunning with a caravan headed anywhere but Coalition territory. Smiley confirmed his suspicions with a brief shrug.

“Been on my own here for a while, I’m used to it. No one will find me if I don’t wanna be found.” Frost rose to his feet again, towering over the soldier. He scowled.

“Wrong. I can find you any time I choose; you can’t hide from me, kid. You can’t imagine how quickly and completely I will take you down. You don’t have a chance. It’s what I do, Smiley.” He grabbed the Dead Boy by the neck of his T-shirt and pulled him close. “Now, let’s talk. Starting with the hacker.”

Mengus wasn’t happy. He stood at his workbench in the back of the hovertruck. The damaged gun turret was disassembled in front of him, each piece meticulously cleaned and repaired as best he could. Next to him lay a small pile of replacement parts. Mengus had been an Operator long enough that repairs like this didn’t really require his full attention; as his hands and tools worked the metal and plastic of the weapon, his mind wandered. Mengus wasn’t particularly concerned about the gun. Battle damage happened; he would fix it, it

would be fine. That was something he could handle. What he didn't feel nearly as comfortable with was what Frost was doing at the moment. He pursed his lips slightly as he reattached a wire's connecting element, debating with himself for the tenth time whether he needed to monitor the interrogation or not. For the tenth time, he answered himself no. Frost wouldn't go too far. Mengus knew his mercenary friend very well, but there was always an X factor with the cold, distant soldier. It had been almost a year of adventuring, fighting together, before he had even known the Headhunter had a name besides Frost; it was another six months, having saved each other's lives more than once, before Frost had told him what it was. Mengus had never met anyone with as apt a nickname as Frost, the frigid bastard. He pitied the Coalition soldiers for a moment. Those Dead Boys didn't know what they were getting into.

Mengus had gone to meet Willy, hanging back and changing his mind when he saw the two SAMAS circling the neighborhood. He had decided to work on the damaged rail gun while he waited for them to leave. They were taking their sweet time, though; he had plenty of time to fix and re-install the weapon before they finally appeared to finish their questioning and left. From the rear of his truck, Mengus watched the two power armored soldiers exit the bar. His breath caught in his throat. Violators.

The Free Quebec government had gone through some overhauling when they split from the Coalition States a few years back. Scrapping the death's head iconography was a start. Mengus approved; the Dead Boys' armor had always bothered him. They put it on to show they weren't scared of monsters, but the skull visage turned them into monsters themselves. The Quebec forces had refitted their armor to a glossy black sheen, with featureless, reflective helmets very similar to Mengus' own. The Violator SAMAS was another new addition, one that Mengus was both somewhat awed and intimidated by.

The glint of the armor caught the orange light of streetlights and the sparkle of fresh snow flurries blowing down the street. Heavy armored plates covered the body, the black gloss broken here and there by rows of spikes or the matte weave of tactical pouches and holsters. Powerful engines protruded from the back of the suit, giving it a brutish, hunched-over posture, accentuated by long wings folded down either side; the overall impression was a bat-like silhouette, which Mengus guessed was entirely intentional. Those wings weren't just for intimidation, either; edged with sharp Vibro-Blades, they could be deadly weapons in their own right. Each of the soldiers carried a weapon connected to the chassis by an armored cable; a bulky, heavy energy cannon they hefted with the effortless ease robotic strength allowed. Mengus whistled under his breath.

"V-SAMs. Paige, are you seeing this? Run scans and diagnostics, and prep my armor just in case these guys come back." He swivelled around in the well-lit interior and rose from his stool, boots clanking on decking as he stomped to his weapons rack. Having stripped out of the top half of his armor, he pulled the bodysuit back up his heavily muscled torso, cinching the neck and layering on the armored plates. He buckled his helmet to his belt and reached for his bandolier, setting it over his shoulder. Mengus checked his pistol, setting it back in the holster before turning back to the screen. "Paige, how's it coming with that scan?"

The artificial intelligence's voice was musical and calm over the internal audio of the truck.

"Just a moment, Mengus. Weather interference. It does appear that they are unmodified Violator SAMAS, pinging Free Quebec military IDs that check out according to the latest database Frost is running. Serial numbers are..."

"Thank you, Paige. That's fine. Keep scanning, text only."

"Of course, Mengus." The voice almost sounded sheepish. Mengus watched the two power armor pilots stride a few paces from the door and open their wingspans. The planes of black metal rose level with their shoulders and the engines on their backs began to whisper, then whine, then roar before they shot up and into the air so fast the camera almost couldn't follow them. Mengus felt like shaking his fist as they soared off into the night. His own modified SAMAS suit was more than capable, but he'd had a bit of a crush on the V-SAM ever since he'd first laid eyes on it. Satisfied the soldiers had departed, he opened the side hatch and stepped out into the snow.

"Paige, send out a couple of eyeballs to watch the perimeter and let me know if any more Quebec forces show up. I'm going to go see Willy."

A quick glance around told Mengus he was alone in the alley behind Willy's. Gusting snow whipped across his face and he briefly lamented not having worn his helmet. The back door was intact, so he knocked on the dark metal in a two-two-three rhythm. He heard a discernible clanking sound from inside and the door slid ajar. Stepping inside, Mengus came around the service hallway and into the main room. He winced when he saw the extent of the damage. Energy weapons didn't generally leave much behind when they hit most materials, and large portions of walls, floor and ceiling were just missing. Mengus walked around the bare floorboards, boots crunching stone and wood underfoot. He could stand in a specific spot and look through several walls where a blast had passed through them before dissipating. An entire corner of the main room was open to the street. Something needed to be done about the damage right away, which meant even more credits to get it finished quickly. This was going to cost them.

Jill, a human waitress Willy used as a face to deal with Quebec troops, was standing in the center of the wrecked bar, shivering in the cold. When she saw Mengus step in, her face lit up in anger. Leaning her head back over her shoulder, she parted her pouty, bright red lips:

"Sugar! There's a bull here to see you about a china shop!"

"What?" Willy's lumpy head appeared above the splintered wood of the bar, one of his facial tentacles wrapped around a tap handle. "Who is it?"

"Willy," Mengus cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I – ah, that is, we – wanted to square with you for the damage tonight." He walked closer to the short alien, stepping over shattered furniture and new snow. Willy stood, two of his arms holding a beer keg with deceptive ease, the third reaching forward to move debris here and there as he pulled the keg to the center of the room. He uprighted a couple of chairs.

"Good to see you, Mengus. Come on, have a drink. This one's on me," said Willy, tapping the keg and beginning to pour out the foam. He chuckled. "This isn't the worst I've put up with."

"We really didn't mean to bring you any Quebec attention. Or CS, for that matter. You can send the bill for your repairs, renovations, whatever, to Happy Ending Solutions."

"I know," Willy smiled in a way that only a vaguely squid-like face can accomplish. His four eyes, each parted down the middle with a catlike slit, creased near the corners as his roughly textured skin pulled back around his tentacles to show his beak twisted to one side. A gurgling chuckle escaped him again. "That's why I keep Jill around. Those Quebec boys come by, she does the talking and I stay under the radar. Besides, they only care about the commotion, not the cleanup after. You boys have always done right by me. That's not what we need to talk about." The charming smile faded from his face. He handed Mengus a cup of beer. Mengus noted ruefully that the stein's handle was broken and he held it by the other side. Jill shivered again.

“Sugar, I’m going upstairs to call somebody to come and patch us up.” Willy nodded, glancing at her as she headed up the mostly-intact staircase. She only looked back to glare at Mengus once, a fact he was profoundly grateful for. He hated apologizing. Mengus looked back to Willy as the D-Bee spoke again. Willy wasn’t chuckling anymore. Deadly serious now, he spoke carefully.

“We need to talk about Frost.”

Frost pulled the bag off Luke’s head quickly, the rough material whistling as it slid over sweaty skin and damp hair. Luke grunted, eyes squinting as he focused on the face of the Headhunter sitting across from him. Frost leaned back in his chair, smoking.

“What do you want?” Luke’s voice was raspy and thin. “Money? You already have our gear, our credits. What does a mercenary want besides that?” He coughed, a thick bark of hot breath escaping into the cold air. Frost could see the heat steaming off him even without thermals. He threw a heavy coat around the soldier’s shoulders.

“Relax, kid.” He exhaled acrid puffs as he pulled the military parka closed. Frost used it over his bulkier cybernetic frame, and Luke hunkered within the big garment like a child wearing his father’s clothes. “We gotta talk.”

Mengus took a drink. He didn’t have a natural distrust of D-Bees, really, just a sense of distrust in general. It was a natural byproduct of living on Rifts Earth. But he had learned a lot about Willy over the last couple of years. The diminutive alien had never lied to him (that he knew of), and Willy – like Frost – occasionally had hunches. But whereas the Headhunter’s hunches usually led him off in pursuit of someone while holding a scrap of their clothes or a discarded weapon, Willy’s feelings were different. Frost was a bloodhound; with scarcely a whiff of his prey he’d track them down with single-minded determination. Willy, on the other hand, would sometimes pull Mengus or Frost or one of their associates aside and whisper something to them. It could be simple, like they should make sure they were careful when they left town. Sometimes it wasn’t – Willy had once told Mengus to watch his back the same night that a punk City Rat had nailed him between the shoulder blades with a laser pistol. He’d been wearing his armor specifically because of what the D-Bee had said. When the innkeeper poured them another drink, Mengus was listening intently for his words.

“Those guys that came in here tonight. I told Frost I was pretty sure they were CS, but it seemed like he already knew. Did you?” He looked up from pouring when Mengus shook his head.

“Not at first. I think Frost knew after he took down the rest of their unit over at Eff Kay’s. One of ‘em looked like an ex-Dead Boy. I guess he was just wrong about the ‘ex’ part.”

“I think so, too. I wanted to tell him myself, but he’s off with that lieutenant now, isn’t he?” Willy handed the cold glass to the Operator, who took it in a gloved hand and stared into it briefly. Mengus didn’t like unknowns, and this whole situation was starting to bother him chiefly because he had no clue what was going on.

“Yeah, he is. Listen, what did the V-SAMs want? Did they know that the guys here tonight were Coalition?” It was Willy’s turn to shake his head.

“No. Random chance; they were just in the area. Jill tells me they said they were responding to the fireworks when the Dead Boys shot it out with Frost. Neither of those two pilots had any idea what was going on. I’m sure of it.”

The way he said it, Mengus didn’t doubt it. For the thousandth time, he wondered what secrets Willy was hiding in that spongy, beige head of his. Like how he always knew what people were thinking, or his hunches. While he pondered the depths of his alien friend, Willy spoke again.

“We need to talk about Frost. I think he’s about to make a big mistake.”

Luke looked confused. Frost could tell his heart was racing. He wouldn’t have expected such treatment. The Headhunter untied his former friend, loosening the bonds before slouching back in his own chair. The soldier rubbed his wrists, savoring the renewed flow of blood to his freezing extremities.

“What is this? You gonna kill me or let me go?”

“Which do you prefer, kid?” Frost gestured to the table between them, where a bottle of whiskey sat next to two glasses. “Pour us a drink. We should have another one together. Proper. It is a reunion, right?”

“Right.” Luke’s face betrayed his suspicion.

“I always told you, kid; your poker face is terrible. Pour ‘em.” Frost gestured again. “I think, one way or another, it’ll be the last drink we ever share.” He reached down by his side, placing a pistol on the table. Luke started.

“Wh—”

“Here’s what’s gonna happen next,” interrupted his captor. “I’m gonna kill you. That’s a decision I’ve already made. You didn’t exactly make it hard for me either, carrying on like that at Willy’s. We could’ve done this like they do out west, and you know it. You didn’t have to make it professional. Now I have a problem.” Luke, holding his glass and doing his best to appear calm and composed, nodded.

“I get that, Frost. I can solve your problem. I take off. I won’t even go back to the Coalition, man. I’ll go MIA like you. If nobody else survived, then nobody else is there to say anything different, right?”

Tears glistened in his friend’s eyes, but Frost held his gaze without emotion. He was still watching Luke through his thermal filter, watching the tears leave hot trails through the dirt and sweat on his cheeks. It made him look like he was wearing war paint in the bizarre half-and-half world Frost was looking at. There was a problem, though. He wasn’t actually crying. His face wasn’t hot, didn’t show up on the thermals. Frost snorted smoke.

“You can quit that, kid. I’m not buyin’ it. It’s time both you and me got some answers. Time you heard the whole story.”

The truck put on speed as it hurtled down a half-lit alley. Snow blasted against the brick and swirled throughout the narrow space as the vehicle passed, accompanying the muffled whine of its engines as they were stretched to their utmost. Paige expertly weaved the hovering vehicle around obstacles before increasing altitude to avoid the main roads. Mengus was glad for his own training; the G-forces acting on him as the AI undertook maneuvers a human wouldn’t even consider would probably have turned his stomach if not for the time he’d spent in his SAMAS. As it was, he still felt a little queasy.

“Paige, what’s our ETA?”

Paige ran millions of calculations per second, no matter whether machining parts or combat piloting a hovercraft; but whenever that voice chimed into his ear, it always sounded the same. He had programmed her that way, and had named her after pre-Rifts knights’ helpers called pages, informing the so-called personality that he had given her. Paige always spoke with the manner of a trusted servant; she knew the difference between good news and bad news. She tended to give bad news with the tone of an apology. She spoke with that tone right now.

“We should be arriving at Frost’s location in about seven minutes, Mengus.”

“Not soon enough. Is there anything we can do to decrease the ETA?”

“I’m afraid not, Mengus.” Her apologetic voice. “I’m already pushing this craft to its operational limits.”

“Well push it past the limits! Come on, Paige!” For a moment Mengus could almost hear the AI calculating; at the same time, he felt the pull of increased acceleration as Paige disregarded some of her safety protocols’ parameters. He heard the placid tone of her voice again:

“Five minutes, Mengus.”

It had been a long time since Frost had told his story to anyone. He didn’t labor much over the details, simply getting the point across to his old comrade. Luke sat and listened, occasionally taking a drink but always paying close attention. The lieutenant had forgone the pretense of fear; his eyes were as clear as his mind. When Frost was finished, the Dead Boy cleared his throat.

“I get it; you didn’t just ditch us. You thought we were dead or… gone, and vice versa. I got one question, though.” His eyes, although clear, held some old pain in them. It was the sort of pain that comes from believing something terrible because it’s all you have. Frost had seen that look before. His own reflection had held it in his one remaining eye more than once.

“What?”

“Why didn’t you just come back, Frost? Why didn’t you just leave the D-Bees and the mercenaries and come back? Joining up with bandits and freaks, you turned your back on us. Why?”

“Listen.” Frost stood, his head almost hitting the low-hanging light, and walked a few paces back to the gray concrete wall. He placed his gloved mechanical hand on the smooth surface, the tactile sensation muffled by his cybernetics and the fabric of the glove. He never took his eye from Luke. “I don’t owe you an explanation of why I did what I did, only what I did.

“I didn’t want to be a part of the Coalition anymore. I didn’t want to mutilate people – those freaks and aliens are still *people* – for no reason other than I was told to. I work for myself. I don’t always do what’s right, but at least I do all of it for me instead of some emperor I’ve never met and honestly don’t care to. Being a Dead Boy was only a way to get out of the hole I grew up in, Luke. I never wanted more than that.” His friend stood too, leaving the drink and the gun on the table and crossing the room. Frost put his back against the wall, remaining professional. He watched as Luke approached. The Dead Boy stopped a few feet from his former commander, jabbing a finger in his face.

“You know it meant more than that. We were doing something good. Protecting people – *real* people, human beings – from a world that wants them dead. You joined those monsters. I don’t think I’ll ever understand why – and I don’t care anymore. I can’t go back either. So where do we go from here?”

“Where, indeed,” Frost practically growled the words, “are you gonna go if I let you outta here? Back to the CS, despite your half-baked excuses?”

“Thought you were just gonna kill me after this little conversation of ours.”

“Suppose I still might, but I don’t want to.” Frost sighed. “I wanna let you go run off like I did. Not an easy life, kid; but if you’re any good at it, then you could get a few years’ worth of credits and retire all quiet-like.”

“What about you?” Luke had half a smirk on his face. “Why haven’t you retired yet?” Frost smirked right back.

“I’m not sure I can. That’s the other reason I can’t come back, Luke. I’m not a Dead Boy anymore. I’m a professional – a professional who’s good at his job.”

Willy sat in the ruin of his bar, wringing all three of his hands as he focused his attention elsewhere. He had told Mengus everything he saw in his vision – the dark room, the gun, Frost’s back turned – but even his clairvoyance had limits. He couldn’t see past the gunshot. He said a quick prayer for his human friend.

“Good luck, Frost.”

“So you’re a professional. That mean you’re gonna kill me after all?” Luke faced his old friend with a glare of his own, a look of resignation – but without fear. Frost brushed past him, picking the gun off the table. He held it out, pointing it at Luke. Neither of them blinked. Then the mercenary spun the pistol in his hand, offering the grip to Luke.

“No, kid. I ain’t gonna kill ya. I told you about my second chance. It’s time you had yours.” He gestured with the gun. “Take it. You won’t get far in Old Bones without a weapon. That coat isn’t much, but it can handle a shot or two – should be okay until you can get your hands on some better gear.” Luke took the weapon, holding it by his side as the Headhunter walked to the door of the room and shoved it open. Bitter, cold wind swept into the dreary space. He strode back across the room, next to the bottle on the table, and put his back to the Dead Boy. “Get out.” Luke walked to the door, stopping. He quietly turned to see the broad back of his former friend. The gun was in his hand.

“Not yet, Sarge.”

The hovercraft slowed to a halt, floating gently on a cushion of air not a dozen feet from the mouth of the alley. Before it stopped, Mengus leapt out the back, stumbling on the fresh snow. He pinged Frost’s radio. No response. He powered through the shin-deep snowdrifts, heading to the solitary light above an open doorway at the end of the alley. His breath sounded loud and heavy in the confines of his helmet, but in the blowing flurries he didn’t dare remove it – the nightvision was strained in this environment, but he could see far better than he would without it. He kept moving, ignoring the stutter of his optics. He needed to hurry. He told himself again that he wasn’t too late; again, he hoped that was true.

Click. Frost grimaced when he heard it. He had hoped that Luke wasn’t that stupid. He spun around to see exactly what he knew was there – the laser pistol pointed at him, the dawning look of understanding on Luke’s face. He heard the click again. Again. Luke’s face fell, mirroring the gun as it dropped first to his side, then to the floor with a clatter. Frost forced a smirk.

“You punk.” In a single fluid motion he delivered a kick to Luke’s stomach. The cybernetically-powered blow sent him tumbling out the open door and halfway through the brick wall of the alley beyond. Frost stooped to snatch up the pistol as he approached the wheezing, groaning form slumped in the snowdrift across the way. Luke was trying to say something, but the vicious attack had robbed him of his breath. He gasped, spitting blood.

“Frost–”

“Shut your mouth.” In the shrill scream of the wind racing through the alley, Frost had to shout to be heard. He brandished the gun in front of Luke’s face, popping out the drained energy clip and waving it under the Dead Boy’s nose. “Did you really think I would give you a loaded gun and then turn my back on you? I gave you a chance – and you ruined it. That’s your last mistake, Dead Boy.” He roared the last words, laden with meaning, and Luke seemed to pick up on it. Frost tossed the pistol back into the room behind him. He could hear Luke still trying to get his breath. The soldier reached up, pulling Frost’s collar down until the mercenary’s head was almost level with his own. He whispered something under his breath.

“Frost...” If it weren’t for Frost’s enhanced hearing, he never even would have known what the kid said after that. Too much damage to his chest, internal bleeding snatching the words almost before they left his lips. Even with amplified ears, Frost strained to hear his friend’s last words. It didn’t change anything.

“Goodbye, Luke.”

Mengus was only a dozen meters from the door when a man in a heavy parka soared through it, hitting the other side of the alley with bone-crunching force. Raising his pistol, Mengus slowed his pace to a measured combat advance, just like Frost had taught him. He saw Frost tread through the snow to the fallen man, a juggernaut not slowed by snow or wind. The Headhunter didn’t seem to notice him, instead kneeling over the prone man and shouting something that the wind took and Mengus couldn’t hear. He hung back, knowing that getting in the middle of this wasn’t a great idea. Then the thought struck him – Willy’s vision. Frost needed someone to watch his back. Mengus kept moving, raising his pistol again as he saw movement in the doorway.

Luke didn’t take long to die. Frost crushed his windpipe with a bionic hand, watching the life bleed from his eyes. He stayed until Luke was gone – he felt he owed it to the soldier. He closed the staring eyes with his fingertips, rising smoothly to his feet, and was about to go back inside when he heard the shot behind him. Particle beam. He spun, his own weapon sliding from his forearm. Mengus was grappling with a figure in the darkness of the safe house’s interior. Frost’s vision cycled into the infrared. Smiley. Frost’s brow furrowed around his machine eye. What the hell was Mengus doing here?

Mengus was out of his element, even if he had saved Frost from getting shot in the back. Seeing Smiley raise the pistol, Mengus had hurled himself at the soldier. His gun had gone off when Smiley grabbed it, blowing a hole through the thick metal of the door that was straining against its hinges in the violent wind. Mengus had always been strong, and used his strength now to his advantage, but Smiley had better training. He shouldered Mengus against the doorframe, slamming his gun hand into it and sending the pistol spinning onto the floor. They both dove for the weapon, coming together in a tangle of limbs. Smiley quickly got the upper hand, leveraging himself on top of the Operator. Pistol in hand, he began to inch it towards Mengus’s helmet.

Despite the prodigious strength of his workshop-hardened muscles, Mengus could see the pistol incrementally pointing to his face. He clenched his teeth, gritting himself against death. Just as he wondered where the hell Frost was, just as he started to consider that this could be it, a spray of blood splattered against his faceplate. The pressure eased, and although he was still blinded by the sticky liquid covering his helmet, Mengus relaxed. The weight was lifted from him, Smiley’s body easily tossed aside by artificial muscle. He felt a strong grip on his forearm, accepted the help up.

Coming to his feet, Mengus removed his helmet. The red-smear surface again gave way to his pock-marked, gruff features. He met the grin of his mercenary friend. Frost clapped him on the back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Mengus said. “Took you long enough.” Frost’s grin didn’t waver.

“Thought you had everything in hand. I was gonna pour myself a drink, but I hate to drink alone.” He gestured to the bottle and glasses, still on the table. “Shall we?”

They shared a drink; not for the first time, and not for the last. Frost insisted that you don’t drink from a dead man’s glass, so in-

stead the two mercenaries passed the bottle between them, forgetting for a moment the two corpses slowly freezing in the alley. They sat on the floor, backs against the wall. Frost smoked. Mengus, in the middle of a pull from the bottle, thought of something.

“Why were you letting Luke go? Thought you were going to kill him for sure.” Frost reached for the bottle.

“It’s not important. He didn’t need to die, that’s all.” Mengus watched his friend as he swallowed the whiskey.

“He was your friend.” It wasn’t a question. “When you were in the CS Army.”

“Yeah.” Frost didn’t look at him.

“So, you were keeping Smiley alive for the reward. I get that. You were letting Luke go, but – why would you give him a loaded gun? Willy had one of his hunches: you getting shot in the back. Looks like it almost happened.”

“Not a chance. I’m a psychic myself and even I don’t trust that stuff.” Frost chuckled. “I wasn’t in any danger, man.” It was Mengus’ turn to chuckle.

“Really? Tell that to the laser pistol I saw Smiley waving at your back when I showed up. I guess we’re even for saving each other.”

“Not really. Gun wasn’t loaded. I didn’t want to kill Luke, but I sure didn’t trust him. As for Smiley, well... I don’t know how he got out of his binders, but – thanks.”

“No problem.”

They drank in silence for a while. When the bottle was finished, Mengus felt a little woozy. Frost, as always, seemed perfectly fine. He hoisted Smiley over one shoulder. When they were back outside, the wind had died down somewhat – Mengus left his helmet off. Leaving Luke in the alley, the two walked back to where Mengus had left the hovercraft. The recently-repaired camera on the rail gun turret swivelled to observe them as they approached. Paige spoke gently.

“I’m sorry, Frost, but I’m afraid that the reward for Smiley only applies if he’s alive. It appears that he’s been dead for at least thirty minutes.”

“I know, Paige.” The Headhunter practically growled his response into the commlink, his annoyance audible. “Just disposing of the body. Open up.”

“Of course, Frost.”

The hiss of the hydraulics announced warm air that coaxed them inside the truck. Mengus sat at a terminal, unstrapping his weapons and slowly beginning to remove his armor. Frost stood, holding a handle next to the doorframe. He was looking back down the alley. After a moment, he sighed under his breath and closed the door. He replayed the last words Luke had said to him, as he would for years to come after too much drink and not enough sleep. There would be many more cold nights where Frost would awaken hearing those whispered syllables, spoken by a man who knew he was about to die. He whispered his answer, so quietly that not even the artificial intelligence could overhear.

“I’m sorry, too.”

They picked up Squirt about an hour after that. Smiley had given Frost the location where the City Rat was being held in exchange for his life, even if it hadn’t worked out for the now former Dead Boy. The three of them headed back to the garage, ready to rendezvous with *Dead Reckoning*, the airship headquarters of Happy Ending Solutions. The sun was coming up. Frost waited outside Old Bones for the massive flying ship to pick them up, his friends by his side. It was a new day, the long night behind him fading from experience to memory. He was ready for it. The past was the past, and although his was bloodier than most, he was ready for the future. The world would keep moving. He had to keep up.





# Ψ THE BLACK-MALICE LEGACY Ψ

## Optional, Unofficial Source Material for Rifts®

By Matt Olson, with Additional Ideas by Will Hunter. Some tweaks and additional text and ideas by Kevin Siembieda.

## Part II: The Black Arts

**Editor's Note:** This article (along with Part One, appearing in **The Rifter® #63**) contains material that may be overpowered or unbalancing to your **Rifts®** campaign. It is *NOT* official, and many of the technologies and techniques described within exceed the actual capabilities of the Coalition States. That said, we thought it was cool, and something you would enjoy. Feel free to use it, tone it down, or disregard it as you see fit, but if your Game Master decides not to permit it, please respect his or her wishes.

### Identification and Orientation

#### JDMP: Tier Zero Training

“**Tier Zero**” Training is a program and level of psychic training with an increasing number of people being enrolled in it. Its official name is the **Juvenile Directed Mastery Program (JDMP)** for CS psychics. The JDMP is a joint venture between the **Psychic Registration Program** and the CS Military’s **Chi-Town Academy of Psychic Combat**, designed to foster young Master Psychics before their powers begin to fully manifest. Early in his research, Doctor Maliczewski uncovered that though one has to be born a Major or Master Psychic in order to be a powerful psychic, that a psychic’s natural leanings toward a specific range of psychic ability could be ‘adjusted’ via mental and emotional orientation and focus. Thus a person with psychic potential could, in effect, be *molded* (at least in part, most of the time) to develop certain abilities via proper focus (indoctrination). Though lineage seemed to be a factor, especially in the cases like the mutant *Psi-Ghost* and *Psi-Stalkers*, as well as the alien *Mind Bleeder*, many others could be successfully ‘nudged’ into different psychic orientations (psychic character classes). While some Master Psychics come from normal parents with no family history of psychic ability at all, most psychics seem to have a family history of psionics. Taking such youths at a young age and exposing them to special conditioning could change the way the powers manifested. Ideally, this impressionable age ranges between 5-9, though it has worked on a few as old as 12 and as young as three, especially when the child showed psionic proficiency at a young age. Initially, children from *Mind Melter* parentage seemed to be the most receptive, but changes in the program has resulted in successful results in all kinds of Master Psychics. Consequently, JDMP is being expanded to other major Coalition cities as their respective war colleges receive their own psychic academy wings over the next few years. Some *Major Psychics* are also being allowed to join the JDMP as a trial adjunct training program.

As it stands now, when a child is identified and registered with the PRP, the parents are solicited by the authorities from the JDMP to allow them to enroll the child for special psychic training to “better master their special abilities for the good of humankind.” The parents are enticed with incentives like money, better living conditions, better jobs, free and superior education for all their children, help with legal problems, and even expedited citizenship for one or more family members who may be living in the ‘Burbs. Such perks are

modified as appropriate on a case by case basis, and no one is forced to have their child join JDMP, as the CS wants to foster loyalty, not dissent or fear.

Upon admission into the JDMP, the child’s psychic aptitude is tested. Once the training options have been determined, the program coordinates with officials inside of the administrative wing of the **88<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Army Corps** better known as Psi-Bat or Psi-Battalion. The child’s psychic aptitudes are checked against the Coalition’s projected psychic needs and recruitment quotas. Thereafter, the child is then conditioned and fine-tuned to become a particular type of *Master Psychic* (or Major Psychic, with the expanded program) within the child’s psionic aptitude and in accordance with the CS Military’s projected needs. At present, there is a strong emphasis on **Psi-Slayers**, **Psi-Warriors**, **Psi-Nullifiers**, and **Psi-Techs**. As a result, their numbers have become higher within the Coalition States compared to the rest of the world’s averages for similar psychics. All the other kinds of Master and Major Psychics have a place in the **Psi-Battalion** or **Psi-Net** (law enforcement), but at present, the four listed are considered the most valuable and desired.

**The program has a 72% success ratio.** When the desired orientation fails, the child instead ends up being whatever kind of psychic Fate had in store for him or her.

### The MPR Program

The JDMP is responsible for another set of instructional courses called the **MPR program**, or more commonly, “Mip-Red.” Those who are enrolled are encouraged to become productive members of Coalition society as **Major Psychics**. Publicly, this has been likened to a wealth-reallocation/psi-reparation program, allowing some from the previously oppressed psychics of the middle and lower classes to join the ranks of the social elite through opportunity and hard work.

No one refuses an open slot in this program, even if they could; this privilege is not optional and participation is *mandatory* for those selected. This specialized course of study helps them become extremely well-paid **Psychic Sensitives** and **Psychic Healers**. The former become supernatural specialists in either the military, law enforcement or civilian world, while the latter become doctors, nurses and paramedics, though they are *never* allowed to join the **RCSG**. In either capacity, their contributions are considered to be invaluable to the Coalition States and they are regarded as the elite among its citizenry. Providing quick relief to the suffering and injured, or providing invaluable assistance and information to counter the supernatural threats in its many forms is a high honor for CS psychics. To supplement their conditioning to develop their Healing and Sensitive powers, these chosen psychics are given access to the best instructors and highest levels of education available in the CS. Not only does this help them become extremely learned people and successful in their occupational fields, but also keeps their minds focused and busy in a productive, safe and acceptable direction within CS society.

While students and their parents are initially told M.P.R. stands for the “Major Psychic Readiness” program, in reality it’s short for the “Mystic Paradigm Reeducation” program! A program that was modeled to cater to a particular kind of psychic the Coalition wants

to keep a thumb on. A psychic with leanings toward magic and mysticism. The idea is that this program and positive incentives help steer psychics who might have become Mystics, into a different, non-magical orientation (O.C.C.).

Young Mystics are born with an innate trigger, of sorts, that opens them to the forces of magic. CS scientific study has suggested that without magic being clearly present, and better yet, condemned and demonized, that such potential psychics can be molded to become Major Psychics without mystical power. However, *potential Mystics* who become oriented to Healing or Sensitive psionics get a bonus of 1D4 psionic abilities in their chosen category.

Thus far, the program has proven to be an unqualified success, catching and controlling 79% of all detected cases of Mysticism. Those who develop magic abilities and become Mystics anyway (50%), are forbidden from using their mystical abilities and though they retain their official citizenship, are relocated to live in the 'Burbs or remote CS colonies. If the psychic complies and never uses magic, there is never a problem. To do otherwise is to be branded a malcontent and enemy of the State, punishable by death. Mysticism is officially categorized as a dangerous *psychic birth defect* in the Coalition States.

## CS Psi-Soldiers

### Making a Better Psychic Soldier

Of all the classifications of Master Psychics cataloged in the early days of Project Black Gold, the one Carol Black had the most interest in was the **Psi-Warrior**. Though all the powers of the Psi-Warrior are shared with other Master Psychics with nothing unique to them (a Mind Melter could have all the same abilities by pure coincidence), it was the structure of these powers that intrigued Black the most. In interviews with Psi-Warriors friendly to the Coalition, Black uncovered something astonishing: psychics could manifest specific abilities through *instruction* and *focus* in specific areas of ability. While other Master Psychics were born, up to that point the Psi-Warrior was the only known class of psychic that one could argue was "made" – trained. This discovery guided the development of all the underlying theories of the project from that moment forward, and helped develop new ones. After the project was moved to Chi-Town, some of these friendly Psi-Warriors were wooed into coming along and joining the CS – enticed by citizenship, wealth, privilege, and status – in exchange for their participation in the program's studies and service in the Psi-Battalions formed later. It should be noted that the Psi-Warriors who decided to side with the Coalition were not bad people or seduced by evil. Most were just humans who were of the opinion that the fight against the supernatural forces of darkness was better served by the actions and policies of the CS, even if some innocents suffered as collateral damage. War is never pretty, and necessary evils can be forces for the better good if properly directed. Guided by that philosophy, the original band of Psi-Warriors were allowed to open a school in the posh Chi-Town **'Burb of City Side**, where they have been training new Psi-Warriors for Coalition military service ever since. Simply named *House Musashi* (in reverence to Miyamoto Musashi, the pre-Rifts warrior-author of the classic Japanese book, *The Book of Five Rings*), this school is the only place in the Coalition where Psi-Warriors are produced.

The head of House Musashi, and the most influential member of the original group, is a 13<sup>th</sup> level Psi-Warrior named Barthelme Savage. Admittance into this monastery-like school is on a referral basis through the Juvenile Directed Mastery Program (JDMP), sending only those with the mental discipline and aptitude for the long years of instruction. Observation of this instruction has been of great help

to Black and her ongoing projects. Much of what was learned from the Psi-Warriors was adapted (some might say perverted or bastardized) towards the development of the JDMP and the teachings of the secretive Black Arts. Their contributions advanced both programs by at least a decade, even if Black's research was already heading in the right direction.

## Psychic Training & the Academy of Psychic Combat

With the closing of the war in 109 P.A., the probationary period of General Black's school has come to an end and her **CS Academy of Psychic Combat** has been made an official part of the Chi-Town War College. Because the CS wants to maintain control over the amazing combat techniques Black and her fellows developed, the number of authorized instructors at the academy is limited to a handful of qualified psychic soldiers, and even then only those who had already proven themselves with distinction under combat conditions in the war. To curb further unauthorized instruction of even the basic elements, it was deemed that anyone caught passing along these state secrets would be automatically considered guilty of sedition and be treated appropriately. At present (late 109 P.A.), with the school being able to accommodate a class of only 1,840 per year, there are thousands of applications for every one admitted. Only psychics loyal to the Coalition States and interested in becoming CS Psi-Soldiers are even considered for the elite Tier Two training. All candidates must be Major Psychics and have an interest in combat.

General Black believes she will be able to recruit more than a hundred additional Psi-Bat vets over the next few years to serve as instructors. Not only will this help increase the student to teacher ratio at the Chi-Town War College, but also amply fulfill the staff requirements needed for when expansion is approved. New academies in the War Colleges of New Chillicothe and the City of Iron are slated to be opened for enrollment by the end of the year. This should double the number of specially trained CS Psychic Soldiers, every year. (**Editor's Note:** At least, that's the plan before the *Minion War* comes to Rifts Earth in **Megaverse® in Flames**.)

Within the halls of the Psychic Academy of Combat, there are two tiers of instruction a psychic soldier can receive. The lower level of training is designed to enable the psychic recruits to fine-tune their focus and enhance their mental discipline as well as psychic combat training. **Tier One classes** have fewer restrictions on them and can be taken by any CS recruit in Psi-Battalion authorized by the Academy. The curriculum of Tier One training is divided into six classes which may only be taken one at a time. Each class requires a full four months of intense focus and orientation, though some students need to retake the course for the instruction to fully take root (chance of success is 50% +I.Q.+ M.E., averaging out to 72% for most).

Upon completion of Tier One training, the psychic student receives one of the following bonus packages depending on the class he or she selects. Classes may be taken in any order, limited only by each class's availability. Once admitted into the Academy of Psychic Combat, a student is permitted to take one class, return to duty, and come back for further instruction in another class later on without having to apply for re-admittance into the program. Consequently, a student could finish all six courses in as little as two years, but most take 4-6 years, taking breaks between each course. Of course, some only take one or a few, not all of the classes, unless they are moving on to Tier Two training or special operations where such enhanced skills and abilities are required or strongly encouraged.

## Tier One Classes & Bonuses

The first three must be taken in order to take the last three classes.

**1. Meditative Zen (ZEN 101):** Grants the student the power of Meditation in addition to his or her normal allotted number of psychic powers. Meaning, if a Major Psychic can select 8 abilities, he can pick eight, but also gets the Meditation ability as a result of this training.

**2. Inner Calm (ICM 102):** +1 to save vs Horror Factor and +1 bonus to the amount of I.S.P. regained per hour when meditating. Teaches emotional and mental calm, as well as awareness of the psychic and supernatural world without fear.

**3. Thought to Action Coordination (TAC 103):** +1 on Perception Rolls involving the supernatural and psychics, and +1 to disarm. It teaches superior mental focus and mind/body coordination.

**4. Advanced Training: Sustained Mind-over-Body (SMB 104):** +1 to pull punch, +1 to save vs poison/toxin and disease, +2 to the S.D.C./Hit Points recovered from psionic Bio-Regeneration (self only), and +1D6+1 S.D.C. Teaches superior control over one's body.

**5. Advanced Training: Willpower & Determination (WID 105):** +1 to save vs possession, +1 to save vs mind control, and +4% to save vs coma/death.

**6. Advanced Training: Inner Strength Enhancement (ICE 106):** +1 to M.E. and +1D6+1 I.S.P. bonus added to the character's permanent base.

## Tier Two Training

### Psi-Bat Psychic Martial Arts

**Hand to Hand: Dishearten**

**Hand to Hand: Telekinetics**

**Hand to Hand: Kings**

**Combat Telepathy**

**Combat Empathy**

Psychic recruits and soldiers who have completed at least four of the Tier One classes (all six are better) and have an exceptional record of loyalty and obedience are eligible for Tier Two psychic training. Teachers, supervisors and military leaders usually nominate a candidate for such a privilege. Those who accept the invitation are then warned that there is a terrible initiation they must undergo, but they are also told that passing this rite of anguish will grant them passage into a new and amazing era of their lives. If the answer is "no thank you," then the recruit is given a hearty, respectful handshake, wished well, and sent back to service. The same happens to those who fail the initiation. But those who accept the challenge and pass the initiation are allowed into *Tier Two Training*.

Initiation starts with a good night's rest in a designated barrack. For every hour of that night, each prospective recruit is telepathically probed and monitored as the vetting process begins. This should weed out spies and those with low character or undesirable leanings (i.e. sympathy for D-Bees, an interest in magic, and unhealthy interest in other cultures, etc.).

In the morning, after a satisfying breakfast, the psychic recruits are brought into an empty room with a drain in the middle, and then the torture begins. Four Master Psychics from Psi-Bat Delta, Omega and/or PAC take turns administering *Bio-Manipulation: Pain* upon the applicants; maintaining the inhuman torture for a full hour. To ensure the recruit doesn't die, two to three applications of Healing Touch are used, mending the ravages the soldier's body suffers. While this is going on, a few blunt questions are asked while being monitored via See Aura, Empathy and Telepathy, fur-

ther determining the degree of the recruit's patriotism to the Coalition States and guaranteeing the applicant is not a spy or infiltrator of some kind (those immune to telepathic probes are administered a powerful truth-inducing drug). Those who fail to measure up are expelled from the program, while spies and the like are killed on the spot. Once the tortured soldier is vetted to the authority's satisfaction, the psychic is accepted into the second tier of training, on track to become a member of *Psi-Bat Delta*, *Psi-Bat Omega*, or *PAC*.

The initiate is given time to heal, both mentally and physically, but the training has already begun, indoctrinating the soldier into an almost cult-like form of thinking. During this time, additional scans of the psychic's mind and aura are conducted. When deemed ready, the recruit/soldier is given the option of either training in the *psychic-enhanced martial art* best befitting one of the soldier's existing powers, or the psychic can opt to receive a *Psi-Implant* and the psychic ability(s) it may provide. (**Note:** See **World Book 12: Pyscape**, pages 148-153 for details on Psi-Implants.) The Coalition Army always urges the recruit to opt for the "natural" route to avoid the side effects that are common to all CS Psi-Implants. Most choose to go with their natural 'God-given talents,' though some elect to go for the implant. Once a field of study is selected, the soldier is locked into it.

**Training** requires the student to remain dedicated to the program for 1D4+5 months before the martial art starts to become consistently effective. The act of becoming proficient in a Psychic Martial Art (restricted to one per character) physically alters the chemistry of the brain and how it works in order to use its full fighting capabilities. Once that has happened, the psychic has attained Level One proficiency with that combat skill. A Psychic Martial Art supercedes any previous training. It continues to progress with experience, as any other Hand to Hand combat skill, though the recruit is welcomed to make occasional visits at the Academy for further fine-tuning and additional instruction to master this unique and rare art developed by the CS Military. Beyond those visits, the soldier is free to work in the field.

This self-progression is unconscious, subliminally pounded into the soldiers' skulls as part of the intensive training process developed by General Black. This means that the training process and how to advance in it cannot be gleaned through the use of a simple telepathic probe, interrogation, or torture. The only restriction placed on the psychic martial artist/special ops soldier is that he or she is not allowed to *attempt* to pass the instruction on to another psychic. (**Note:** There is only a 01-17% chance of success in teaching a Psychic Martial Art to another psychic outside the CS regimen of training, anyway.) In addition to being considered an act of statutory treason, teaching a psychic a martial art without CS authorization is also a safety precaution to keep such skilled operatives properly oriented (indoctrinated), focused and under Coalition control. The new subliminal training techniques are guaranteed by hypnotic mental blocks and loyalty to the CS.

The vast majority of these Tier Two-trained martial artists become soldiers of *Psi-Bat Delta*, *Psi-Bat Omega* or *PAC*, and are assigned to regular Special Forces units and intelligence agencies to optimize their coverage and impact. At present, a large percentage of those who just finished this elite training are being filtered into General Black's new third elite battalion, *Psi-Bat Psi* (∞). Though it will be roughly a year before they officially become operational, the platoon-strength force is secretly taking part in Operation Nightowl, south of the border, and are trained (all are taught the basics of vampire hunting and have the skill Lore: Vampires at +15%, taken as an O.C.C. Related Skill) and equipped accordingly.

# Psychic Martial Arts

The central core philosophy behind these specialized martial art forms is that although psychic individuals can do amazing things with them, the people who master them don't necessarily develop any new psionic abilities. They learn to channel and use the abilities they already have, in conjunction with a martial fighting style. A so-called Psychic Martial Art that enables the character to do more with the powers he already has (though there are some exceptions).

Learning these martial arts is not intuitive, and at times requires practice that may seem completely unrelated to the desired result. This is one of the reasons why only the Coalition's Psi-Bat has figured out how to develop and refine this style of combat. More open-minded psychics would have difficulty grasping the ideas and properly focusing or accepting these seemingly unrelated activities and exercises of mind and body. **Remember**, at least four of the Tier One training classes must be known before being able to learn a Psychic Martial Art. When meditating, the psychic may engage in martial exercises and movement. Oftentimes, he is completely unaware he is doing these body exercises, as they increase calm and focus on both the physical and mental level. Such routine exercises are crucial for staying in tune to the mind and body, and using the psychic martial art effectively.

Some may question why the masters of Psyscape have not also developed these psychic fighting styles. The answer to that is simple: The Coalition's orientation/indoctrination programs and rigid focus are important to the process. Most psychics are much too open to the metaphysical to embrace this type of martial art. More simply put, the people of Psyscape are more enlightened, open and mentally flexible.

**Skill Adoption and Training:** It is assumed that most characters who take up one of these Psychic Martial Arts is already proficient in one of the common Hand to Hand combat skills (Basic, Expert, Martial Arts, Assassin, Commando, or other). Normally, when a new hand to hand combat skill is taken up, all progression in the previous fighting style (including attacks per melee, bonuses, and abilities) is frozen at its current level and progression begins at the First Level of ability in the new fighting form, substituting the better bonuses for the old ones as they come up. **This is not the case with these skills!** These psychic-enhanced hand to hand styles work in a *supplemental* role to the normal Hand to Hand skills. In short, the Psychic Martial Art stacks on the abilities, bonuses and fighting style of the traditional combat skill, providing additional bonuses and psychic methods of attack in addition to those of the traditional combat skill. The number of attacks per melee round remain the same as the Hand to Hand Combat skill. If the character has no prior combat training, one of the following must be selected: *Expert, Martial Arts* or *Commando*, and the recruit learns it as he learns the Psychic Martial Art (add 1D4 months to his training time).

To learn a Psychic Martial Art, the character sacrifices two of his future O.C.C. Related Skills. Because very few people are permitted to learn any of these fighting styles from day one of their basic training (special cases only; i.e., for Level One characters at the G.M.'s discretion only), these skills come at the cost of *future* O.C.C. Related Skills. Characters who are permitted to start learning these fighting forms must forego a number of O.C.C. Related Skills they would normally be entitled to at higher levels of experience. Some of these Psychic Martial Arts require more future O.C.C. Related Skills than others, due to their power level, bonuses and abilities over the others.

## Hand to Hand: Dishearten Psi-Martial Combat

While other arts focus on harming or breaking the bodies of enemies, this psychic-enhanced fighting style focuses on their opponents' will. Martial Dishearten utilizes the psionic power of *Empathic Transmission* to crush and diminish the spirit. When the masters in this fighting style are done, though their opponents may not be bruised on the outside, they are mentally and emotionally battered on the inside. Some have called this the most effective and brutal of the psychic-enhanced martial arts because it doesn't matter how tough the opponent is, nor how organic, or even if the foe is ordinary or supernatural. If they have a mind capable of feeling thoughts and emotions they are vulnerable.

There is already a great amount of mental trauma a psychic can inflict with Empathic Transmission, consequently, this psionic martial art, was designed to further develop and enhance the range of attacks possible for psychics with the Empathic Transmission power (or the potential to develop the power). As a martial art the psychic must actually touch or strike his opponent or in some cases, make a martial art movement/gesture, to unleash the desired attack at a modest distance of 10 feet (3 m). Those that have a range will be indicated in the description. The martial art sacrifices both the range and duration of the usual Empathic Transmission power in exchange for a wider and enhanced range of debilitating effects. While this means getting dangerously close, the rewards for success are impressive when the payoff comes.

Such fighting capabilities are achieved through rigorous training. As such, the focus of the psychic combat is to inflict crushing emotional and mental impairment to cripple the enemy's ability to fight effectively, if at all. This type of crippling attack that diminishes an opponent is especially effective when fighting as part of a team. The psychic diminishes the foe while his fellow soldiers/defenders take advantage of the monster's weakened state to dispatch it more quickly and easily.

In many cases, each successive and successful strike brings the enemy's will and fighting spirit lower and lower, piling up until the sheer weight of crippling emotions smothers the will and all positive thoughts. In short order, there is just no more fight in the enemy and the opponent flees or gives up. Most are not so much beaten into submission, but rather collapse in apathy, terror, self-loathing, or a combination of twisting feelings. Some feel this fighting art is utterly inhumane and too sinister to be taught and deployed in the field. The pragmatic CS military leaders feel it is a simple matter of fighting fire with fire.

The hallmark of this fighting art is that each attack inflicts accumulative damage or debilitating effects; tearing down an opponent's ability to fight by piling on wave after wave of penalties until the opponent is incapable of putting up much resistance or even able to fight at all. The victim's movement and attacks become slow and sloppy, his ability to focus diluted, and though self-preservation is a strong force to overcome, it can be pummeled into submission from within. Such an emotional barrage can send an otherwise physically strong adversary running away or surrendering.

Despite the effectiveness of this psychic martial art, it does require both physical and mental engagement of the fighter, and it can be deflected, stopped and minimized if the adversary understands he is under psionic attack and has the necessary psychic abilities to counter such attacks.

**Saving Throw vs Psionic Attack.** Every attack, the victim gets to save using his own force of will and Mental Endurance (M.E.). However, some of the Disheartening attacks reduce the will to resist and lower the saving throw.

The more experienced the psychic, the higher the number needed to save. Opponents are -1 to save against a Psychic Martial Artist who is Level Four, -2 to save vs Level Eight and -3 to save vs a Level 12 master of a Psychic Martial Art. **Note:** These penalties apply only to psionic attacks delivered via the Psychic Martial Art, not the use of other psionic powers the character may possess.

**Mind Block**, once erected, prevents any further psychic attacks, but damage and penalties already inflicted remain in force and are still effective for their full duration. Also remember, that while the Mind Block is in place, the character is *closed* to all forms of Telepathy, Empathy, Empathic Transmissions and similar mental communication, including those from comrades that could be beneficial. Moreover, the psychic cannot use such powers if he has them himself.

**Suppress Fear** prevents a character from feeling fear and helps him to think calmly, rationally, and clearly. Any and all fear-based attacks via Empathic Transmission or the Dishearten psionic martial art have NO effect whatsoever (no damage, no penalties, no emotional response). Moreover, all other types of Empathic Transmission attacks based on Confusion, Despair, and Hate, are diminished (half the penalties and duration). Better yet, using Suppress Fear on oneself or another person (by touch) negates any penalties that may have already been inflicted by the Dishearten martial art or Empathic Transmission.

**Duration of Dishearten Attacks:** Each effect only lasts for 1D4 melee rounds (15 to 60 seconds), plus one additional melee round (15 seconds) per every TWO levels of the psychic's experience.

At the end of each duration, each set of penalties and effects wears off suddenly, even when an *accumulated stack of penalties* are in effect. The duration of each kind of emotional attack begins with their first hit and does *not* increase or reset with subsequent hits, unless the special *Weight of Despair* attack is used to increase duration. No matter how many additional penalties are piled on with a given technique, once that technique's duration is up, all penalties from that technique vanish, though penalties and effects of others psionic attacks may still be in effect. **Note:** It is unlikely the respective techniques will wear off in the middle of a short skirmish; thus, no complicated charts should be needed to track them. Remember, the duration bonuses are based off the character's own experience level, not the skill level with this martial art.

Each Disheartening strike is potentially effective upon a successful strike to any part of the opponent's person. Flesh to flesh contact is not necessary, thus allowing the psychic to not only enjoy the protection of body armor himself, but also bypasses the armor of the victim (up to an M.D.C. of 180 in main body). Creatures such as demons and dragons with M.D.C. hides are hit by a successful roll to strike regardless of how much M.D.C. it may possess, be it a few points or thousands. HOWEVER, the duration is half as long. Dishearten attacks that can be inflicted with a sharp combat gesture, don't even require physical contact, but rather create a momentary ripple effect in the air similar to the ripples of water when a stone is thrown into a pond, expect the ripple is directed at a specific target.

**Physical Parry Can Block a Psionic Attack.** As a martial combat, even the psionic attack that is delivered as a punch, jab or touch, can be *physically parried* or *dodged*, just as any physical blow. A successful parry means the strike was not successful and the psionic attack did not fire off (no loss of I.S.P. by the psychic attacker).

If the roll to strike hits, only then does the attacker expend I.S.P. and launch his debilitating strike.

After a successful hit, the victim is allowed a save vs psionic attack. A successful save means no penalties or effects are imposed.

Failure to save means the victim is struck with a Disheartening psionic attack. Apply penalties as per the intent of the attack.

Each new successful Dishearten strike can inflict a new dark emotion or add to the weight of a previous one, inflicting accumulating despair, fear and penalties.

If the psychic also has the ability to create a psychic extension of himself, such as a Psi-Sword, Psi-Dagger, ectoplasmic limb, and similar, attacks with it may be combined with the Dishearten martial art to inflict the usual physical damage, plus one Disheartening effect/attack.

Defensively, if the psychic opts to withhold one or more of his usual attacks per melee, he can parry an incoming attack by hand or with a psychic extension (including a Psi-Shield) and *simultaneously* strike his attacker with a Disheartening attack of his own. No roll to strike is necessary, contact is made, and his opponent rolls to save as usual. For this to work, the parried strike must be a hand to hand attack such as a punch or kick, not via a handheld weapon.

**I.S.P. Cost:** The psychic martial artist has the option of either expending 25 I.S.P. up front, facilitating the use of any number of techniques inside of a 15 second window (limited only by the character's number of attacks per melee), or 6 I.S.P. per each martial technique/strike that Disheartens (unleashes an Empathic Transmission). Physical blows can be combined with psionic attacks via the Psychic Martial Art.

**Cost in O.C.C. Related Skills to take this Psi-Martial Art:** Four O.C.C. Related Skills.

## Psychic Martial Art: Dishearten

**Level 1: Fluster Punch.** This psionic attack can be delivered via any physical punch, jab or chopping strike. It instills a growing sense of frustration that makes the flummoxed victim become increasingly angry and feel an obsessive urgency to defeat his opponent. These intense emotions makes the character aggressive and quicker to react (granting a non-cumulative +1 initiative *bonus!*), but it also makes him more clumsy and wild with his attacks. This results in the following penalties: -1 on Perception Rolls, -1 to strike and -1 to dodge. Subsequent, successful Fluster Punches and failure to save has an accumulative result, increasing these penalties by the same amount to a maximum of -7.

**Level 2: Mortification Strike.** This attack can only be delivered as a slap to the face, a kick, body flip, tripping attack, or a successful disarming of the opponent. A successful attack inflicts a powerful sense of *humiliation, wounded pride* and *shame*. This inflicts the following penalties: -1 to parry, -1 to dodge, -1 to disarm and a penalty of -5% on all skills. Subsequent, successful Mortification strikes and failure to save increases these penalties by the same amount to a maximum of -10 and -50% on the performance of all skills. At that point, the character's confidence and self-esteem are so shaken, he is likely (01-66%) to want to retreat or at least seek 1D4 melee rounds of respite from combat (hides behind a debris pile or under a vehicle), until he can catch his breath, compose himself and reenter combat. If his comrades are retreating, the mortified combatant will run away with them without hesitation. If half of them are slain or defeat seems imminent, he is likely (01-80%) to flee to fight another day. If cornered, the character's sense of humiliation may be so great that he chooses to fight to the death rather than be captured or he drops his weapons and surrenders without any further resistance (for now). This decision should be left entirely to the player of said character.

**Level 3: Dishearten.** This attack can be delivered by any physical strike; punch, kick, body flip, and so on. It makes the character feel worried, unsure of himself and afraid that he and his teammates are fighting for nothing, are going to fail or be killed. The opponent continues to fight, but can't shake these feelings and suffers the following, accumulative penalties: -1 to save vs Horror Factor and -1 to save vs psionic attack. Subsequent, successful Dishearten strikes

and failure to save increases these penalties by the same amount to a maximum of -6. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks.

**Level 4: Despondent.** This attack can be delivered by any physical strike, punch, kick, body flip, and so on. It makes the character feel "despair or sorrow" with compounding effects. The victim is overwhelmed by a sense of deep sorrow that he suffers the following penalties: -1 on Perception Rolls, -1 to strike and -5% to Spd attribute. Witnessing something sad or tragic requires the character to save vs Horror Factor of 15. A failed save has the same temporary effect as failing an H.F. roll.

**Level 5: Weight of Despair.** This attack can be unleashed via physical contact or a punching gesture with a range of 10 feet (3 m); line of sight is an absolute must. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels greater despair and desperation, because this attack *increases the duration* of any one previous Disheartening Martial Art attack, including stacked penalties from multiple successful strikes, an additional 1D4+1 melee rounds. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

**Level 6: Dismay.** This attack can be delivered by any physical strike, punch, kick, body flip, and so on. It makes the character lose courage and resolution with compounding effect. The following penalties apply: -1 on initiative, -1 to M.E. (a temporary reduction of the victim's Mental Endurance attribute). The victim's M.E. is temporarily lowered by 1 point per successful strike and failure to save. Subsequent, successful Dismay strikes and failure to save increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -7, at which point the character will flee. If cornered he is likely to surrender.

**Level 7: Desperation.** This attack can be delivered by any physical power punch, power kick, grapple, choke hold or other pinning action. It makes the character feel an overwhelming sense of desperation and panic that he *must escape, NOW!* The victim has all his normal bonuses if fighting to escape and flee, and if he breaks free – or is let loose – he will immediately run away. And keeps running or hiding for 2D4 melee rounds. All bonuses are reduced by half and attacks per melee are -2 if he fights the urge to run and stands his ground or presses forward. Duration 1D4+1 melee rounds.

**Level 8: Blood Rage.** This attack can be delivered by any physical strike, punch, kick, body flip, and so on. It makes the character feel so enraged, he loses sight of his objective and everything around him, and all he desires is to kill or defeat the Psychic Soldier before him. This can be dangerous for the psychic, because his opponent is fixated on him and him alone. All sense of time and purpose are gone, and the enraged attacker fights in a lunging, reckless manner, intent on his enemy's demise. Cumulative Penalties: Total focus on his opponent, -2 on Perception Rolls, -1 to parry and dodge (doesn't even consider them, just keeps charging forward, hungry to kill), -1 to roll with punch. Subsequent, successful Blood Rage strikes and failure to save, increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -7, at which point the attacker strikes only with Power Punches (or similar power blows that count as two melee actions per attack and are intended to kill). If cornered he will fight until slain, knocked out or incapacitated, howling like an animal the entire time. **Note:** The advantage of this attack is that the opponent forgets all else and is unaware of anything happening around him.

**Level 9: Confusion.** This attack can be delivered by any physical strike, punch or kick to the head. It makes the character feel confused and groggy, his vision fading in and out of focus. Penalties: Making a Called Shot is *impossible* and -1 to parry and -1 to disarm. Subsequent, successful Confusion strikes and failure to save from them, increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a

maximum of -8, at which point the character is likely to abandon the fight and run away or hide for 1D6+1 melee rounds.

**Level 10: Break Down Physical Resistance.** This attack can be unleashed via Karate style punches, chops, or kicks only or via a sharp, punching gesture with a range of 10 feet (3 m); line of sight is an absolute must. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels weak and vulnerable. Cumulative Penalties: -2 to save vs poisons/toxins/drug, -2 to roll with impact, -1 to save vs magic, and -2 to save vs Coma/Death. Subsequent, successful Break Down Physical Resistance attacks increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -8 (-14 for save vs Coma/Death). Characters with Bio-Regeneration only recover *half* their usual amount! **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

**Level 11: Break Down Mental Resistance.** This attack can only be unleashed via punches or kicks to the head or chest/heart or via a sharp, punching gesture to the same area with a range of 10 feet (3 m); line of sight is an absolute must. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels mentally weak and vulnerable. Cumulative Penalties: -1 to save vs psionic attacks, mind control of any kind, illusions and domination magic. Subsequent, successful Break Down Mental Resistance attacks increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -7. Characters with I.S.P. recover *half* their usual amount for the next 1D4 hours. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

**Level 12: Break Down Spiritual Resistance.** This attack can only be unleashed via punches or kicks to the stomach or spine, or via a sharp, punching gesture to the same area with a range of 10 feet (3 m); line of sight is an absolute must. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels doomed and spiritually vulnerable. Cumulative Penalties: -1 to save vs possession of any kind, -1 to save vs psionic and magical domination/enslavement and breaks in half the time under interrogation. Subsequent, successful Break Down Spiritual Resistance attacks increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -7. Characters with P.P.E. recover *half* their usual amount for the next 1D4 hours. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

**Level 13: Spirit Strike.** This attack can only be unleashed via punches or kicks or via a sharp, punching gesture at any spirit. Effective against ghosts, spirits, energy Beings, Entities and Astral Beings within a range of 10 feet (3 m) per level of the psychic's experience; line of sight is an absolute must and the psychic must be able to see the invisible or sense spirits. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the usually ethereal being takes 2D6 points of damage from the energy attack.

**Level 14: Crushing Weight of Combat.** This attack can only be unleashed via punches or kicks to the lower body, or via a sharp, punching gesture to the same area with a range of 10 feet (3 m); line of sight is an absolute must. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels weak and suddenly weary. Cumulative Penalties: -1 to save vs possession of any kind, -1 on initiative and -1 melee attack. Subsequent, successful Crushing Weight of Combat attacks increases these penalties by the same amount every time to a maximum of -6 (the victim is always left with at least one attack per melee), at which point the character is likely to flee or surrender. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

**Level 15: Peace, Trust, Surrender.** This attack can only be unleashed via punches or kicks to the head or chest/heart. Failure to save vs this psionic attack means the victim feels as if he can't fight anymore. Cumulative Penalties: The first failed save means the char-

acter wants to back out of the fight and will suggest everyone just backs away. The second failed save vs this attack will compel the character to surrender without resistance, provided such an action will NOT lead to his demise or torture. If surrender means death or torture, the character will try to escape and flee rather than surrender. **Note:** This attack counts as two of the psychic's attacks and can only be attempted once per melee round.

## Hand to Hand: Telekinetics

The power of Telekinesis is the ability to exert a mental force on objects, capable of physically moving and manipulating them using nothing but the psychic's will and mental focus. This psychic fighting style makes use of the same Telekinetic force in combat via punching, kicking and parrying motions.

The character **MUST** possess the following abilities in order to select this Psychic Martial Art: Levitation (varies), Telekinesis (varies), Telekinetic Punch (6) and Telekinetic Push (4). Any other Telekinetic powers of choice (Leap, Lift, Super, Force Field, etc.) are excellent additions.

Those who become adept in the this Psychic Martial Art uses their TK powers in melee combat to parry incoming attacks and strike from a distance. After years of training and practice, movements become lightning fast, and their Telekinetic punches and kicks become as natural as their physical reflexes. Using their enhanced TK powers, they can block/parry the blows of Mega-Damage weapons, magical fire balls (provided they see them coming), and similar attacks. Master Psychics with the power of Telekinetic Force Field can use it like a shield, and TK energy can be used to cushion the psychic from impacts and falls, preventing them from breaking their own bones or getting concussions.

The first step in using this skill is the activation of the power of Telekinesis, and not by a token amount to conserve I.S.P., but full

blast! Because the power has variable I.S.P. costs that technically can go up to infinity, the term "full blast" is defined as enough for the psychic to overcome his own body weight. So for instance, if a psychic weighs 170 lbs (76.5 kg), and if he has the regular psychic power of Telekinesis, 23 I.S.P. must be expended to get the full effect of the abilities provided by this skill. If the psychic has the power of Super Telekinesis, the same character would only need to expend 20 I.S.P. (or 17 I.S.P. if your G.M. allows for +1 I.S.P. per +10 lbs/4.5 kg after the initial base 10 I.S.P.). If the character has both versions of the power, the player may choose which one to use.

Expending more I.S.P. does **not** result in an increase of ability, nor can one expend half the required I.S.P. for half the effectiveness. It's all or nothing; there is no middle ground or cherry picking. Once the power's duration has lapsed, or the character's I.S.P. has been exhausted, precluding the possibility of extending the duration any longer, the character returns to normal. Obviously, the smaller a person is, the less energy needed to fuel everything this skill offers, and the longer they can sustain their enhancements; consequently, women tend to be the greatest fighters in this marital style due to their ability to outlast their peers, stemming from their tendency to weigh less. Put another way, with Martial Kinetics, the smallest tend to be the greatest.

While this skill enables the character to learn how to apply his power of Telekinesis in new ways, this in no way diminishes the other Telekinesis-based powers available to the psychic. Powers such as Telekinetic Leap, Telekinetic Lift, Telekinetic Punch, and Telekinetic Push may be used simultaneously (one melee action) with the telekinetic techniques gained through this skill, stacking their effects, damage, and/or bonuses. Of course, this is contingent on the psychic having the other powers and the desire to expend the extra I.S.P.





**I.S.P. Cost:** Variable: Enough to overcome the psychic's own body weight for general abilities. Enhanced strength strikes cost extra on a per strike basis depending on classification (see above).

**Future O.C.C. Related Skill Cost:** Three O.C.C. Related Skills.

**Suggested Secondary Skills and Supplementary Psionic Powers:** Wrestling, Boxing, Acrobatics, Gymnastics, Telekinetic Leap, Telekinetic Lift, Telekinesis Super, Telekinetic Force Field, and Telekinetic Accelerated Attack.

## Telekinetics Psychic Martial Arts

**Also known as:** TK Combat.

**Level 1: Levitate self (12 I.S.P.).** 15 feet (4.6 m) per level of experience without the usual 60 foot (18.3 m) limit. Other objects can be levitated upward as long as all their weight is accounted for. **Combat bonus:** +2 to roll with impact.

**Level 2: TK Parry Melee Attack (2 I.S.P.).** The psychic is +1 to parry incoming punches, kicks and melee attacks from handheld weapons via Telekinetic force. The psychic martial artist moves his arm/hand to parry as usual (also roll to parry the same as always), except the attack is parried by an invisible force 6-12 inches (0.15 to 0.3 m) from the psychic's arm.

**Level 3: TK Punch (6 I.S.P. per punch).** This is done just like the TK Punch psi-ability, except the trained Telekinetic martial artist can throw his punch with a sharp punching gesture and strike up to 2 feet (0.6 m) away per level of experience. Damage is 3D6 S.D.C.; P.S. bonus does not apply to these long-range strikes.

**Level 4: TK Kick (10 I.S.P. per kick).** Similar to the TK Punch psi-ability, except the trained Telekinetic martial artist can throw his TK kick with a sharp kicking gesture and strike up to 2 feet (0.6 m) away per level of experience. Damage is 4D6 S.D.C.; P.S. bonus does not apply to these long-range strikes.

**Level 5: TK Strike Bonus (no I.S.P. cost).** The martial artist is +1 to strike with objects hurled via Telekinesis.

**Level 6: Mega-Damage Boost (20 I.S.P. plus the cost of the TK Punch or Kick).** This boost counts as two psionic attacks, and is used to make a TK Punch or Kick deliver Mega-Damage. 1D6+3 M.D. per punch or 2D6+4 M.D. per kick. Martial artists are conditioned to use an M.D. Boost is used only against M.D. targets, and they find it impossible to use M.D. Boost on ordinary people and S.D.C. targets.

**Level 7: TK Push (4).** Same as the Telekinetic Push psionic ability except it has double the range and does 1D6 S.D.C. damage.

**Level 8: TK Parry Thrown Object (6 I.S.P.).** The psychic can parry objects *thrown* at him such as weapons, rocks, knives, magical fireballs, and similar items traveling at comparatively slow speeds (120 mph/192 km) via Telekinesis. The psychic moves his arm/hand to parry as usual, except the attack is parried by an invisible force 1D6 feet (0.3 to 1.8 m) from the psychic's arm. **Note:** The psychic MUST see the attack coming. Roll to parry as usual. A failed roll means the object hits. A success means it was knocked harmlessly away.

**Level 9: TK Parry Projectiles (6 I.S.P.).** The psychic can parry incoming fast projectiles with the following modifiers:

- 1 to parry arrows and crossbow bolts.
  - 2 to parry one bullet/slug.
  - 3 to parry a burst of bullets or pieces of shrapnel.
  - 5 to parry a machine-gun or rail gun burst.
- Cannot parry an energy blast.

The psychic moves his arm/hand to parry as usual, except the projectiles are parried by an invisible force 1D4 feet (0.3 to 1.2 m) from the psychic's arm. **Note:** The psychic MUST see the attack coming. Roll to parry as usual. A failed roll means the object hits. A successful parry means it was knocked harmlessly away.

**Level 10: Telekinetic Leap or Leap Kick (8 I.S.P.).** Same as the Telekinetic Leap psionic power, but the range is 6 feet (1.8 m) per level of experience up or lengthwise. If combined with a leap kick, damage is 6D6+6 S.D.C. plus P.S. damage bonus (if any) or is 2D6+6 M.D. if boosted to inflict Mega-Damage (see Level 6, above for M.D. Boost).

**Level 11: Increased TK awareness.** +1 on Perception Rolls involving any type of psionic Electrokinesis, Hydrokinesis, Pyrokinesis, and Telekinesis attacks and +2 to dodge or parry them.

**Level 12: TK Strike Bonus (no I.S.P. cost).** +1 to strike with TK hurled objects and +2 to pull punch (reduce damage) using any Telekinetic attack.

**Level 13: Soft TK Wall (10 I.S.P.).** An invisible force as large as 15x15 feet (4.6 x 4.6 m) that blocks an area or pushes against incoming people and vehicles moving into and against it. While it is like a wall, it is a wall that has give and can be pushed, more like an elastic net that catches, slows down and then gives way. Requires a normal or Augmented P.S. of 28 or Robotic P.S. of 22 or Supernatural P.S. of 12 to push through it. But the act of pushing through the Telekinetic Wall causes the person to lose two melee attacks/actions and reduce Spd by half for one melee round. **Range:** 20 feet (6.1 m) per level of experience. **Duration:** One melee round per level of experience. Even if one or several people push through it, others with insufficient strength or knowledge may be unable to pass. **I.S.P. Cost:** 15.

**Level 14: Increased TK Capacity.** The Psi-Bat psychic can lift double the usual amount via the *Telekinetic Lift* ability at no additional cost.

**Level 15:** +1 attack per melee round, +1 to dodge TK attacks and +1 to roll with impact.

## Hand to Hand: Kings

### Telepathic and Empathic Combat

This psychic-enhanced fighting form was inspired by observations and studies of a particularly nasty D-Bee known as the *Lanotaur Hunter* (see **World Book 30: D-Bees of North America**, page 115). The creature has the innate ability to reach out with a blending of telepathic and empathic senses, and used that psychic telemetry to making it a deadly fighting machine. But in patterning a psychic-enhanced martial art on the Lanotaur, a problem was encountered. The way the brain of human psychics is wired, only one key power could be chosen as the basis for the fighting style.

After a long debate, it was decided to develop two different, but closely related versions of the Kings Psychic Martial Arts: one utilizing *Telepathy* and the other *Empathy*. The two are so closely related, they have virtually the same instruction program and can be taught alongside each other. That said, only one path of instruction may be chosen. Those who have both powers *cannot* stack the benefits gained through training in this skill. They earned the name 'the Kings' because nobody thought Emperor Prosek would allow them to be developed or taught, even within the elite Psi-Battalion. When Emperor Prosek endorsed both, they were nicknamed the Kings.

Students of this fighting style learn to pick up on the surface and primal combat thinking of their opponents. The psychic learns to read the mental words, images and impressions of an opponent to predict what the adversary is going to do a split second before the action is put into motion. This gives the psychic sufficient lead time to counter or avoid the opponent's action with what seems to be lightning reflexes, when in fact he's only moving at ordinary speed a split-second before another adversary, as if he knows what's coming. Which, of course, he does. This also means that should the psychic's thoughts or emotions be closed off from him (like when a Mind

Block is erected), all of the bonuses and abilities gained through this psychic martial art are *completely negated*. The Psi-Bat operative using the Combat Telepathy (or Empathy) must leave himself open to outside stimuli to utilize his fighting skills.

**Bonus Note:** All bonuses are cumulative and are in addition to the Psi-Bat soldier's primary, physical Hand to Hand Combat skill, but only when the psychic is locked into his adversary with a telepathic link, and the *Psychic Martial Arts bonuses* only apply against the one (or two) adversaries with whom the psychic has established a telepathic link – not ALL opponents.

**Save vs Psionic Attack:** All potential targets of Combat Telepathy get to roll dice to save vs psionic attack, same as usual. Non-Psychics need 15 or higher. Minor and Major Psychics need a 12 or higher, Master Psychics need a 10 or higher. This combat is most effective against non-psychics.

**Vulnerability:** Maintaining an open psychic channel to facilitate this psychic-enhanced martial art also imparts a -1 penalty to save vs psionic attacks leveled at the *Telepaths*.

**I.S.P. Cost:** 4, lasting two minutes per level of experience.

**Future O.C.C. Related Skill Cost:** Three O.C.C. Related Skills.

**Suggested Secondary Skills:** Telepaths benefit from language skills.

**Note:** ALL of the combat bonuses listed below ONLY apply to combat with eligible opponents as described above, who have not made a successful saving throw to save vs Telepathy, or do not have active Mind Blocks in place.

## Kings Telepathic Psychic Martial Arts

**Also known as:** Combat Telepathy.

**Level 1: Telepathic link with one combatant.** The telepathic Psi-Bat soldier trained in Kings Combat Telepathy is able to pick up on general thoughts, mental images, and intentions that telegraph the immediate plans of a *single opponent*. This includes all thoughts that are specifically directed at the psychic and the situation; i.e. the thought that he is going to try to run away, or pull his gun and fire, throw a punch, radio for help, and so on and so forth. This gives the Psi-Bat soldier a huge advantage, because in combat, not only does the psychic know his enemy is about to punch or stab him, he knows the exact location his opponent is going to aim for (head, arm, stomach, etc.) or whether this guy is trying to kill him, disarm him, trying to move past him and why! (“I need to get away and escape.” “I need to activate the explosive device.” “I need to radio for the troops down the hall.” And so on.) All of this data enables the psychic to respond with optimal efficiency. The opponent can be as far away as 10 feet (3 m) plus another 5 feet (1.5 m) per level of experience.

Best of all, once telepathic contact is established, the Psi-Bat psychic does NOT need to maintain a clear line of sight to that specific opponent. If the soldier remains attuned to his intended opponent's thoughts, he is able to know where his opponent is located – even if behind him, invisible or otherwise out of sight/hiding – and what his next move/attack is going to be, and is able to respond accordingly (dodge an ambush or attack from behind, know he needs to dodge gunfire in a second or to parry a strike to the side of his head, etc.).

This also means that being attuned to one specific opponent's immediate intentions, the penalties for **fighting blind** or fighting the invisible are only -3 to strike, parry, dodge, etc. When a telepathic lock is in place, the Psi-Bat soldier and his opponent are, in effect, linked and no line of sight is needed.

**Combat Bonuses:** +2 to automatic dodge (the act of dodging does not use up a melee attack), +1 to parry and +1 to roll with impact.

**Note:** The character has an automatic dodge via telepathic link with an adversary even if he normally does not have automatic dodge, in which the dodge does not use up a melee attack).

**Level 2:** The Psi-Bat telepath is able to read thoughts and intentions clearly enough that he can respond to them if he wants to unnerve his opponent or to defuse a volatile situation. Psi-Bat soldiers are trained to do this in such a way as to not reveal they are reading their opponent's mind. This can be done to defuse a violent situation or to egg one on. For example, knowing an adversary is thinking about pulling and firing his pistol, the psychic might say something like, “Hold on a second. Let's talk this out. Nobody needs to die today.” Something like, “Do it. Go for your gun,” could surprise and stall the action and bring about discussion, or inflame the violence and cause his adversary to draw and fire. Similarly, the psychic will read thoughts that might indicate the opponent and his team's plans, which could be important for stopping other violence and crimes. Or he may detect his opponent is worried about something or someone, or has a spouse and children, etc. Psi-Bat soldiers are trained to exploit such knowledge. Let the role-playing begin.

**Combat Bonuses:** +2 on initiative and +1 to disarm.

**Level 3: Telepathic periphery sense.** Though initially the thoughts of only one person can be focused on at a time, the psychic is peripherally sensitive to the thoughts of others within his usual range for this psychic martial art (10 feet/3 m and +5 feet/1.5 m per level). These peripheral thoughts come across as faint murmurs. Incoherent as most may be, those directed at the Psi-Bat psychic ring out loudly, alerting him to the fact that one or more other enemies may be planning to charge in to subdue him, open fire, join the melee, and similar, and give him a chance to respond in an appropriate manner. In addition, the peripheral thoughts convey a sense of direction, not only allowing the psychic to know roughly where other enemies are located in relation to him and his current opponent, but also making it virtually impossible to take the psychic by surprise as he becomes aware he is at the focus of someone else's thoughts (similar to how someone using your name gets your attention even if you're talking to someone else).

This telepathic radar of sorts can be crucial in combat (range is 10 feet/3 m +5 feet/1.5 m per level of experience).

**Combat Bonuses:** +2 on Perception Rolls involving danger and ambush.

**Level 4: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to strike and +1 to pull punch.

**Level 5: Combat Bonuses:** +1 attack per melee round. Remember, this and other bonuses are in addition to those from the character's primary, physical Hand to Hand skill.

**Level 6: Switch telepathic link.** The Psi-Bat Psychic can now facilitate instant changes in the focus of his telepathic link from one person to another person. Meaning he may want to drop the link with his current adversary to establish a link with a different individual within range, to find out his intentions and get a better, overall idea of what's unfolding around him.

Changing to a different mind can be done at the speed of thought, but counts as one melee attack. The other person also gets to save vs psionic (Telepathy) attack. If he saves there is no link established, and the psychic can try to establish telepathic contact with someone else. Once contact is established, it must be maintained for the rest of that melee round before it can be changed again. If linked to someone the Psi-Bat soldier is not directly fighting, the soldier is distracted and suffers a -2 penalty on all combat moves (strike, parry, dodge, disarm, etc.) directed at him by anyone to whom he is not linked.

Opponents engaging the Psi-Bat psychic may only save vs psionic attack when the initial contact is made or later if they suspect such a telepathic link actually exists. However, more often than not, most people are completely oblivious to the telepathic connection or that their thoughts are being read and telegraphing their combat moves and immediate intentions toward their opponent. (Another reason to keep the Psychic Martial Arts a military secret.) Should the psychic

lose his telepathic link via a successful save, he can try to reestablish the link or switch to someone else nearby at the start of the next melee round. Each attempt to connect, whether successful or not, expends 4 I.S.P. If an opponent suspects, rolls to save, and fails, the established link remains in place, and the psychic's adversary is likely to assume psionics is not at play, and continue to fight without trying to break the telepathic connection again. After all, how can a non-psychic know if psionics are at play or not? If the psychic chooses to disconnect with one person to link to another, and then go back to the first guy, reestablishing the connection is NOT guaranteed. Roll to save vs psionic attack as usual.

**Level 7: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to automatic dodge.

**Level 8: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to entangle and parry.

**Level 9: Combat Bonuses:** +1D6 damage from punches and kicks because the psychic knows to strike when his opponent drops his guard and where he should be most vulnerable.

**Level 10: Now there are two.** The psychic can establish a telepathic link to two different opponents with whom he is fighting. This can be two on one or him directly engaged with one and taking shots at another within his range of combat telepathy.

**Level 11: Combat Bonuses:** +1 on initiative.

**Level 12: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to save vs Horror Factor and +1 to disarm.

**Level 13: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to entangle and pin.

**Level 14: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to automatic dodge.

**Level 15: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to strike.

## Combat Empathy

This Psychic Martial Art is very similar to the Telepathic Kings Combat, but requires a bit more subjective interpretation and intuition, making it appealing to Psychics who like to rely on their gut hunches and feelings.

Combat Empathy requires the trained psychic learn to recognize and translate the shifting emotional swings and cues in his opponents. Whether they are the aggressor or the victim, emotions and chemical reactions within the body (think adrenaline) flare in *every-one* involved in confrontations and threatening conditions. The Psi-Battalion psychics who learn to master Combat Empathy become proficient in reading emotional cues and emotions. Much like Combat Telepathy, the empathes are able to identify the emotions that indicate a person is about to attack, swing a punch, pull a weapon or engage in cruelty or brutality. While the cues are not always as clear as hearing the words or seeing the image of the person's intentions via Telepathy, in some ways, the empathic warrior knows more. He knows what emotions are behind the attack. He'll know if it is hate, love, fear, rage, envy, etc. and that may enable the psychic to know how best to respond. If the opponent is mad with rage, he probably needs to be subdued or taken down. However, if it is fear or the desire to protect a loved one, then maybe the violence can be prevented, defused or stopped before someone gets killed.

Knowing a person's motives, greed perhaps, can also influence the outcome. ("Here, take the gems. That's what you want, isn't it? Take the gems and go. We won't stop you. Nobody needs to get hurt.") If the psychic can tell those around him are frightened or nervous, he may be able to play on those fears to bluff the enemy or distract and unnerve him/them, or cause dissension amongst their ranks. While this is not physical combat – it is *psychological combat* – and it can be very effective in the field. For example, based on the emotions of the adversary, the Psi-Bat psychic may be able to hazard a reasonably accurate guess that the bad guy holding the hostages or a human shield is NOT likely to actually fire, or doesn't want to and can probably be talked down if handled properly. Likewise, the

empath will know if the hostage holder is a psychopath who will kill without hesitation or is so hopped up on drugs, or filled with rage, that he will kill and needs to be 'taken down' at the first opportunity.

With experience, the psychic who has mastered Empathic Combat can sense and feel the general emotion all around him, enabling him to assess situations and know when it's a powder keg ready to explode, or a situation that could be talked down to a non-violent resolve. Empathy can also be used to pinpoint and target the leader or villain calling the shots and really in control of the situation. Once identified, take him down and perhaps the others retreat or surrender more readily, or fight less skillfully.

Otherwise, Empathic Combat functions very similar to Telepathic Combat.

That said, there are a few distinct differences that some might consider shortcomings with the Kings Combat Empathy. Emotional readings are more vague and difficult to interpret than the straightforward thoughts gleaned through Telepathy. Different people manage to express, repress and manage their feelings differently from others, and may not have as obvious or intense cues. Consequently, psychics who base this skill off the key power of Empathy have a somewhat different range of bonuses and abilities. They may not know exactly how and where an adversary is going to strike with a Vibro-Sword, but he'll know when and why (fear, hate, greed, envy, psychopath, just following orders, etc.).

**Bonus Note:** All bonuses are accumulative and are in addition to the Psi-Bat soldier's primary, physical Hand to Hand Combat skill, but only when the psychic is locked into his adversary with an empathic link, and the *Psychic Martial Arts bonuses* only apply against the one (or two) adversaries with whom the psychic has established an empathic link – not ALL opponents.

**Save vs Psionic Attack:** All potential targets of Combat Empathy get to roll dice to save vs psionic attack, same as usual. Non-Psychics need 15 or higher. Minor and Major Psychics need a 12 or higher, Master Psychics need a 10 or higher. This combat is most effective against non-psychics.

**Vulnerability:** Maintaining an open psychic channel to facilitate this psychic-enhanced martial art also imparts a -1 penalty to save vs psionic attacks leveled at the *empath*.

**I.S.P. Cost:** 6, lasting two minutes per level of experience.

**Future O.C.C. Related Skill Cost:** Three O.C.C. Related Skills.

**Suggested Secondary Skills:** Empaths benefit from skills that study humanoid behavior and culture, including Anthropology, Intelligence, Philosophy, and Psychology, so they can better understand the emotions and likely reactions of their opponents.

**Note:** ALL of the combat bonuses listed below ONLY apply to combat with eligible opponents as described above, who have not made a successful saving throw to save vs Empathy, or do not have active Mind Blocks in place.

## Kings Empathic Psychic Martial Arts

**Also known as:** Combat Empathy.

**Level 1: Empathic link with one combatant.** The empathic Psi-Bat soldier trained in Kings Combat Empathy is able to pick up on the specific emotions and emotional cues that indicate the intention to fight or flee in a *single opponent*. This includes all emotions and flares of emotions that signal an impending attack, building anger, frustration, hate, etc., that are specifically directed at the psychic and the situation; i.e. the emotion of fear and flight, or survival instinct and flight, or hate and attack, or love signifying concern for another rather than oneself, and so on. This gives the Psi-Bat soldier a huge advantage, because the psychic can sense his enemy is about to punch or stab him, and he knows the reason why (feels cornered, following orders, hate or disgust, envy, etc.), which can help the psy-

chic devise an on the spot response that may be something other than fight, subdue, kill. (“Don’t be afraid, we’re not going to hurt you.” “Stay calm, we can work this out.” “I can help. Put the gun down.”) Reading emotions can also target the most dangerous/hostile person in the group, or enable the psychic to provoke a desired conflict or response by playing to an adversary’s emotions, making him more afraid, or uncertain, or more angry and reckless, etc. All of this data enables the psychic to respond with optimal efficiency. The opponent can be as far away as 10 feet (3 m) plus another 5 feet (1.5 m) per level of experience.

Best of all, once the empathic contact is established with one specific adversary, the Psi-Bat psychic does NOT need to maintain a clear line of sight to that specific opponent. If the soldier remains attuned to his intended opponent’s emotions, he is able to know where his opponent is located – even if behind him, invisible or otherwise out of sight/hiding – and what his next move/attack is going to be, and is able to respond accordingly (dodge an ambush or attack from behind, know he needs to dodge gunfire in a second or to parry a strike to the side of his head, etc.).

This also means that being attuned to one specific opponent’s changing emotions (He’s calming down. He’s getting more upset and is going to attack!), the penalties for **fighting blind** or fighting the invisible are only -4 to strike, parry, dodge, etc. When an empathic lock is in place, the Psi-Bat soldier and his opponent are, in effect, linked and no line of sight is needed.

**Combat Bonuses:** +1 to automatic dodge (the act of dodging does not use up a melee attack), +1 to parry and +1 to roll with impact. **Note:** The character has an automatic dodge via the empathic link with an adversary even if he normally does not have automatic dodge, in which the dodge does not use up a melee attack).

**Level 2:** The Psi-Bat empath is able to read emotions and emotion-based cues clearly enough that he can respond to them if he wants to unnerve his opponent or to defuse a volatile situation. Psi-Bat soldiers are trained to do this in such a way as to not reveal they are reading their opponent’s emotions. This can be done to defuse a violent situation or to egg one on. For example, knowing what an adversary is feeling points to motivation and intent. Things the psychic may be able to use against him directly or to influence those around him and his immediate foe.

Most psychics with Combat Empathy are masters of psychological warfare, misdirection, distraction and instigating events and outcomes. If his adversary is afraid he might try to calm him, “Hold on a second. Let’s talk this out. We’re all afraid. Nobody needs to get hurt.” Or he might use it to intimidate his foe to flee or surrender. “This place will be swarming with CS Dead Boys in another minute. If you’re smart you’ll run away (or surrender) while you still can. Hear that? SAMs landing on the roof is my guess. But the Dog Boys will probably rip your throat out first.” Or to save an innocent life, the Psi-Bat soldier may say, “I can see you want to hurt someone. Well, that’s me. Don’t look at that mother and little girl. I’m the one you want. It’s the CS you hate. Oh yeah, it’s the CS that gets our blood boiling. Soldiers like me pushing your around. Come on. Bring it to me.” Similarly, the psychic can read emotions that indicate what the opponent and his team’s plans are, which could be important to stopping crime and saving lives. Or he may detect his opponent is worried, sad, or vengeful about something or someone, and so on. Psi-Bat soldiers are trained to exploit such knowledge. Let the role-playing begin.

**Combat Bonuses:** +1 on initiative and +1 to disarm.

**Level 3: Empathic periphery sense.** Though initially the emotions of only one person can be focused upon at a time, the psychic is peripherally sensitive to the general emotions of others within his usual range for this psychic martial art (10 feet/3 m and +5 feet/1.5 m per level). These peripheral emotions come across as faint mur-

murs and agreement or opposing feelings. Incoherent as most may be, those directed at the Psi-Bat psychic ring out loudly, alerting him to the fact that one or more other enemies may be planning to charge in to subdue him, open fire, join the melee, or do something that has nothing to do with him. This gives the psychic a chance to respond in an appropriate manner. In addition, the peripheral emotions convey a sense of direction, not only allowing the psychic to know roughly where other enemies are located in relation to him and his current opponent, but also making it virtually impossible to take the psychic by surprise as he becomes aware he is under the scrutiny of someone else’s emotions (similar to how someone using your name gets your attention even if you’re talking to someone else).

This empathy dragnet of sorts can be crucial in combat (range is 10 feet/3 m +5 feet/1.5 m per level of experience).

**Combat Bonus:** +2 on Perception Rolls involving danger, magic and the supernatural.

**Level 4: Sense the Supernatural and Creatures of Magic.** Supernatural beings think and feel things differently. Those trained in Combat Empathy can sense when the emotional response is that of a supernatural being or creature of magi. However he cannot usually tell exactly what that creature may be.

**Combat Bonus:** +1 to save vs possession.

**Level 5: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to save vs Horror Factor and +1 to save vs mind control of any kind.

**Level 6: Switch empathic link.** The Psi-Bat psychic can now facilitate instant changes in the focus of his empathic link from one person to another. Meaning he may want to drop the link with his current adversary to establish a link with a different individual within range, to find out his feelings and get a better, overall idea of what’s unfolding around him.

Changing to a different mind can be done at the speed of thought, but counts as one melee attack. The other person also gets to save vs psionic (Empathy) attack. If he saves there is no link established, and the psychic can try to establish empathic contact with someone else. Once contact is established, it must be maintained for the rest of that melee round before it can be changed again. If linked to someone the Psi-Bat soldier is not directly fighting, the soldier is distracted and suffers a -2 penalty on all combat moves (strike, parry, dodge, disarm, etc.) directed at him by anyone to whom he is not linked.

Opponents engaging the Psi-Bat psychic may only save vs psionic attack when the initial contact is made or later if they suspect such an empathic link actually exists. However, more often than not, most people are completely oblivious to the empathic connection or that their feelings are being read and telegraphing their combat moves and intentions toward their opponent. (Another reason to keep the Psychic Martial Arts a military secret.) Should the psychic lose his empathic link via a successful save, he can try to reestablish the link or switch to someone else nearby, at the start of the next melee round. Each attempt to connect, whether successful or not, expends 4 I.S.P.

If an opponent suspects, rolls to save, and fails, the established link remains in place, and the psychic’s adversary is likely to assume psionics are not at play, and continue to fight without trying to break the empathic connection again. After all, how can a non-psychic know if psionics are at play or not? If the psychic chooses to disconnect with one person to link to another, and then go back to the first guy, reestablishing the connection is NOT guaranteed. Roll to save vs psionic attack as usual.

**Level 7: Combat Bonuses:** Opponents with whom the psychic is empathically linked are -1 to save vs Empathic Transmission attacks when the attack comes from the psychic.

**Level 8: Combat Bonuses:** Opponents with whom the psychic is empathically linked are -2 to save vs Hypnotic Suggestion, See Aura and Sense Evil when cast by the psychic.

**Level 9: Combat Bonuses:** The martial artist is +1 to save vs Empathic Transmission and possession of any kind.

**Level 10: Now there are two.** The psychic can establish an empathic link to two different opponents with whom he is fighting. This can be two on one or him directly engaged with one and taking shots at another within his range of combat telepathy.

**Level 11: Combat Bonuses:** +1 on initiative and +1 to parry.

**Level 12: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to save vs Horror Factor and +1 to disarm.

**Level 13: Combat Bonuses:** +2 to save vs insanity.

**Level 14: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to automatic dodge.

**Level 15: Combat Bonuses:** +1 to strike and Exorcism used on opponents with whom the psychic is empathically linked enjoy a +10% bonus to the success ratios of the Exorcism.

## Typical Psi-Bat Squads

### Psi-Bat General Operations Squad

This is the most common kind of Psi-Battalion squad. It is attached to a regular army or naval infantry unit; typically one squad in each battalion. It is intentionally kept loose and vague for ease of management, but also diversified to optimize flexibility for a wide range of missions. Psi-Tek equipment is available for the members of this squad, but typically on an assignment to assignment basis, and is dependent on availability.

**2-3 Commandos,** armed with C-29s. All are Major Psychics.

**2-3 Eruptors,** one of each for diversified utility.

**1-2 Reactors.** One of whom is always a Psi-Nullifier or Nega-Psychic.

**1-2 Kill Hounds or Dog Boy** with DMP-D1 armor and armed with C-27s and heavy bionic weapons.

**1 Dominator.** Usually a Mind Melter.

**1 Psi-Stalker** who is always either a Psi-Nullifier, Nega-Psychic or Psi-Slinger.

### P.M.C.I. "Pim-See" Team

#### Psi-Bat Military Criminal Investigations

When Psi-Bat and the original Second Military Division of Special Operations was established in 85 P.A., it came with the condition that the organization also participate in policing activities of their fellow psychics as well as fellow soldiers in Psi-Battalion. In addition to their military and crime scene investigatory roles, Pim-See teams agreed to serve as the military police, even when the accused psychic is in Psi-Bat, the regular CS army any branch of the military or CS law enforcement. This can extend to ordinary civilian crimes to capital offenses, to human psychics and Dog Boys who go AWOL. As such, the team's focus is on an equal mix of tracking abilities as well as investigative training. Each team has one or two Master Psychics drafted from the regular Psi-Bat units. To make things fair, no individual can be drafted twice, and the draft is completely randomized. Each draft rotation lasts no more than twelve months at the most, but no less than six. The team's armaments, gear, and vehicles vary from assignment to assignment depending on the particulars of the case, including Specter and Peacekeeper gear.

**1-2 K-9 Agents** ("Sniffers") of the tracker breeds.

**1 Psi-Slayer.**

**1-2 Master Psychics,** Mind Melter or others.

**1-2 Specters** with Minor or Major psionic abilities.

**2-3 Peacekeepers** with Minor or Major psionics.

### Psi-Bat Mecha-SEAL Squad

As their name implies, this squad is highly adaptable and equally suited for sea-, air-, or land-based combat operations, though technically they are Army troops.

**Psi-Bat Psi-Tech MOS Special CS Training:**

Pilot Sky Cycles (As per the RPA "Fly Boy" Ace; **World Book**

**11: Coalition War Campaign,** page 83.)

Robot Combat Elite: All power armors in the SAMAS family.

Robot Combat Elite: One of choice.

Robot Combat: Basic

Robots & Power Armor

(Skill Note: At first level, reduce the Psi-Tech's normal O.C.C. Related Skills by three and Secondary Skills by two, then progress as normal.)

**4-6 Psi-Techs** with the training above. May be issued any kind of power armor or sky/rocket cycle, but typically they go into battle in either Wind Jammer Sky Cycles, Terror Trooper power armor, or Striker SAMAS power armor.

**1-2 Psi-Ghosts.**

**1-2 Zappers or Bursters.**

**1-2 CS Commandos** trained in Psychic Martial Arts.

**2-4 Operators** who possess Minor or Major psionics are always attached to this squad. Though they are always psychic, the Operators are not Psi-Bat trained nor officially part of the organization. A third are regular army, while the rest are civilian workers contracted directly by Psi-Bat. Each is selected for not only talent and ability, but personal compatibility as well.

### Psi-Bat LRRP Squad

Psi-Bat Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols may be sent into just about any region or wilderness, but especially places known to harbor magical, psionic or supernatural hostiles; the Magic Zone for example. Their mission is still essentially deep-penetration scouting, gathering of intelligence, and engaging in wilderness guerrilla warfare when targets of opportunity present themselves (at their discretion), as well as missions with special objectives. All human Master Psychics of the squad are equipped the same as CS Rangers, especially the Psi-Druids of the team who share some of the Rangers' training.

**1-2 CS Psi-Stalker** with training in Communications and equipped with a long-range military field radio.

**1-2 Dog Boys** wearing DMP-D1 heavy Dog Boy EBA, because they function as heavy fire support of the squad, these dogs are permitted to carry C-29 Hellfire plasma cannons. One the dogs is usually a tracker while the other is a large breed soldier (never a Kill Hound; cool heads need to prevail). Both have the duty of carrying the squad's extra gear and supplies (+2 P.S. & +1D4 P.E.), including a month's worth of rations.

**2 CS Master Psychics,** usually a **Mind Melter** and a **Psi-Slayer.** The former for raw psionic power and versatility, the latter due to their tracking abilities.

**1-2 Zappers or Burster.** The Psychics carry three weeks of rations and receive training in Wilderness survival.

**2-4 Psi-Druids** whose job is to help the squad live off the land, cover their trail, follow enemy trails, and navigate their way through the thickest of forests. Though ecologically conscious, these are not the typical Psi-Druids who walk the land like wandering sages dispensing good and wisdom wherever they go. The Coalition Psi-Druids of Psi-Bat are Rangers trained to track and engage in guerrilla warfare using their powers to optimize their success. Though reluctant to harm guard dogs and pets, they will not hesitate to quell the animal sentries and take down their masters. Another common

job is to help find the enemy's water supply so wells or underground reservoirs can be closed off, usually explosively. They also use their ability to see plant life in different ways to find traps, snares, and snipers with ease, but also lay booby-traps of their own.

## **Psi-Bat Urban Assault Squad**

This team specializes in combat in the urban environment. They are often allotted a pair of Scarab Officer Cars for fast movement. When operating in enemy cities and towns, they acquire fast-moving local transportation that doesn't stand out. Operating similar to SWAT teams, they have access to a wide variety of weapons and gear, including CS explosives and weapons of pacification.

**1 Psi-Bat Dominator**, usually a Mind Melter.

**1 Psi-Bat Reactor** such as a Psi-Nullifier or Nega-Psychic.

**1 Psi-Ghost**, often equipped with a Vibro-Garrote or some other stealth-kill weapon.

**1 Psi-Tech** in light power armor armed with a C-40R rail gun (or non-CS equivalent).

**1-2 Dog Boys or Kill Hounds** with DMP-D1 armor, armed with bayonet affixed C-27's and heavy bionic weapons.

**1-2 Psi-Slingers** in heavy CA-6EX armor (or a non-CS equivalent on covert operations) and armed as heavily as possible.

**2-3 Eruptors**, typically a mix of Zappers and Bursters.

## **Psi-Bat Anti-Magic Squad**

While any squad that has at least one Psi-Nullifier or Nega-Psychic has some anti-magic capabilities, this squad was assembled to handle the jobs where the target is ridiculously filthy with magic! Those with magic-negating psionics make up the bulk of the team's numbers to handle multiple spell weavers and psychic attacks. Anti-Magic Squads are generally not fully self-sufficient, nor are they capable of tackling any assignment, but the squad is an excellent supplement to any platoon or company expecting heavy magic resistance.

**1 Mind Melter.**

**1-2 Kill Hounds or Dog Boys.**

**2-3 Psi-Nullifiers** who take turns providing a Group Mind Block for the team at all times during combat and in times of danger, granting protection in a 120 foot (36.5 m) radius.

**2-3 Nega-Psychics** who contribute to the counter-magic work. Also because they are perpetually closed off to the supernatural, they are capable of operating away from the protective umbrella of the team's Group Mind Block.

**1-2 Psi-Stalkers** who serving as the team's primary trackers and anti-monster specialists highly effective against the supernatural.

## **Psi-Bat "Haunt Hunters" Astral Security Squad**

These members of the Astral Security Force (ASF), colloquially known as the "Haunt Hunters," are responsible for defending the Coalition's bases and cities from incorporeal intruders. Though Astral intruders are their primary concern, they also engage beings such as ghosts, poltergeists, evil spirits, and the like. They can deploy quickly to any situation. The team enjoys support from a large body of mutant animal spotters in the material world.

**5-9 Psi-Bat Master Psychics.** All selected for their powers of Astral Projection and Telepathy, and ability to harm others in Astral form. One third to half of the team is always made up of Psi-Slayers due to their psychic tracking abilities, even in Astral form. When in Astral form, if the intruder's location is not yet known, the squad occasionally splits up to optimize their search pattern. But no matter what, they never stray too far from each other so they can attack as a team.

## **Psi-Bat Astral Security MOS Skills**

Radio: Basic (+10%)

Tracking (Astral Being ~ SPECIAL: 20% +5% per level; able to pick up on the faint tell-tale signs of where an Astral Being has been in the very recent past and where he has gone.)

(Skill Note: At first level, reduce the Master Psychic's normal O.C.C. Related Skills by two (2), then progress as normal.)

**1-2 Dog Boys or Psi-Bat Psi-Stalkers.**

**1 CS Technical Officer; Minor or Major Psychic** with Communications MOS, the power of Telepathy and the Combat Telepathy martial art. This individual is responsible for coordinating the actions of the trackers, while at the same time sorting through incoming sighting reports from the ISS and regular military. The trackers are kept in constant contact via the radio and Telepathy, while the Astral soldiers are kept in contact via Telepathy. The telepathic messages are sent to the Astral soldiers' physical brains, which then filters from their brains down their respective silver cords, ultimately ending in their Astral minds elsewhere (kind of like two cans connected by a string).

## **Psi-Bat Imperial Security Squad**

The world of Rifts Earth is a dangerous place, especially for those who attract the ire and contempt of those who possess and command the supernatural. This is especially true for the top leadership of the Coalition States. To keep the core leadership of the CS alive, extraordinary measures have been taken, ranging from the infrastructure and machinery that surrounds them, to the people tasked to ensure their safety. Even before the existence of Psi-Battalion, psychics have always been paramount to the protection of CS leaders. Providing V.I.P. security is the jurisdiction of Psi-Bat. Unlike with other squads, there are no green soldiers or inexperienced psychics assigned to Imperial Security. The average level of experience: 8th.

One squad is commonly assigned to the same rotation of V.I.P.s over and over again. Not only is this so they can form a bond of confidence and trust, but so the psychics can become familiar with the person. The reason why this is important is because it allows them to extend their powers of Sixth Sense and Clairvoyance to the V.I.P. As such, attacks targeted against the V.I.P. only, but not the psychic bodyguards, will still elicit a psychic forewarning, allowing the squad to either preemptively neutralize the danger or whisk the V.I.P. away to safety.

**2-4 Kill Hounds or Dog Boys.** Their job is to get the V.I.P. to safety at the first sign of trouble by any means necessary, and are authorized to harm or kill (whichever is more expedient) *anybody* who gets in their way other than another V.I.P.

**2-3 Psi-Nullifiers or Nega-Psychics.** Their job is to try to neutralize any threatening mages or psychics in the area. By staying close to the V.I.P., the Nullifiers can extend the advantage of their ability to react on an instinctual level against attacks that would affect them and the V.I.P. as well. The Nega-Psychics and others tend to give the Nullifiers a little space so as to not get caught in their automatic range of influence.

**1-2 Mind Melters**, one of which always has the power of Telekinesis Force Field, and one who always has the power Group Mind Block. Their first duty is to erect defensive positions and safe zones to facilitate the team's withdrawal in the event the V.I.P. comes under attack. If the opportunity to take proactive measures present themselves, they are to take them without hesitation.

**1 Zapper and 1 Burster.**

**1-2 Special Forces** with Major Psionics and trained in Psychic Martial Arts.

# The Well of Visions

## Official Material for Rifts®, and an Intro to Rifts® Northern Gun™ One & Two, and Megaverse® in Flames™

By Matthew Clements

The defenders lay slain, scattered about the temple's well-kept gardens and polished hallways. Arvilius didn't pause to read the inscriptions as he entered the inner sanctum. The temple was like so many others the Demon Prince had desecrated over the years. He knew not who had built it, or to what god it had been devoted. He wasn't even sure what this planet was called.

At the temple's center, Gyrus, a slave-mage he had captured many worlds away, was already chanting over a mystic pool. Its waters were still, even as a massive battle raged in the skies overhead and the natives tried in vain to defend themselves. The entire planet's population would have to be put to the sword, and all in return for a few glimpses into this magic pool. Connected to an underwater Rift, it had been enchanted aeons ago to show the watcher views of faraway places and differing dimensions.

"It is ready?" he asked.

"The planet's energies keep the waters in a state of perpetual readiness, my lord. I must only prepare my own inner focus."

"You already know what I want to see. Show me the Earth. Show me the lands of the humans."

Gyrus focused on the water in front of him and pictures began to play across it like a screen.

"Magic energy interferes with the image, sire, so we shall only see areas away from ley lines."

"Not a problem. I've heard these Coalition fools fear magic. They stay far from the Rifts."

The slave-mage nodded. He dipped his hands into the pool and the images took form. The pool allowed him to see through the eyes of others, on dimensions and worlds far removed from this one, but Gyrus could also feel their emotions, their impressions of the world around them...

\* \* \*

Hughes strolled along Menominee's docks, mentally noting the ships that sat tied to the quays, trying to guess what each one carried within its hold. A few were busily loading up for their next job, sparing him the need.

A familiar face walked by; engineer's mate Ryan Peil carrying an armload of loose mini-missiles. One slipped as he noticed Hughes, but he snagged it before it hit the ground.

"Captain."

"Captain."

They exchanged nods and knowing looks.

Hughes had never commanded a ship, had no vessel of his own other than the rusted speedboat he used to go into port. He had been Captain Dagger Sullivan's third mate before the Coalition had sunk old Sully's *Green Bay Goddess*, but that was the height of his pirate career.

In Menominee, known pirates were officially not allowed to use the port or even enter the city. To get around this, they adopted fake jobs and cover stories, rarely putting much thought or creativity into it. Ninety percent of them said they were a captain of some kind, claiming their ship as a freighter or a tugboat or a lake escort if it had too many overt weapons.

Hughes said that he operated a fishing vessel whenever the authorities asked. It was a simple cover story, without elaboration or glamor, easy to keep straight. Easy for guards and port officials to forget all about.

Menominee's sales district sat facing the port. It was a muddy, depressing little town, really. Still, most of the "communities" Hughes had known were hastily assembled pirate camps, places that made even post-Apocalyptic Menominee look like a thriving metropolis. Nice or not, it was where the pirates of Green Bay and Lake Michigan stopped to do their shopping.

"Captain."

"Captain."

He said it as he crossed paths with Kara Schwartz, first mate aboard the notorious *Wave Siren*.

"Captain."

"Captain."

Gregory Welms, gunner aboard the infamous *Midnighter*.

"Captain."

"How do ya' do, Captain?"

John Hollowitz, ship's cook and part-time torture specialist for the misleadingly-named *Rainbow Trout*.

He passed a dozen other friends and associates on the way back to the speedboat he had taken out to the city, referring to each of them cheerfully as "captain." It was a farce, everyone in Menominee knew it, but the thin facade of respectability kept things moving smoothly.

His boat was just ahead, on the other side of Merle, a six-foot Doberman who had once been employed by Chi-Town's ISS. A lot of ex-CS Dog Boys were stationed in Menominee; they helped keep out monsters and magic users, and Coalition visitors who might report them were unheard of in the backwater trading post. Merle was on the take, too, and wouldn't be giving Hughes any trouble. Besides the regular bribes, he had bought the walking mutt enough drinks over the years that they could almost be considered friends.

Merle wasn't alone, though. A dozen Loss Prevention Officers were searching the compartments of his boat or waiting along the dock. Merle looked at him remorsefully, his canine features projecting the appearance of a sad puppy dog.

Hughes got the picture immediately and slowly backed away. They could confiscate the boat. As long as he could just make it out of town...

Two LPOs grabbed his arms from behind.

"Good afternoon... *Captain*. Got a few questions for you, if you don't mind."

\* \* \*

Arvilius held up an enchanted scroll. It showed images from Rifts Earth; Coalition soldiers, Rifts opening amongst ruined buildings, shots of the sun, moon and sky. They bore little resemblance to the muddy port city Gyrus had shown him.

"Is this even the right planet?"

"It is the Earth, sire. I am sure."

Arvilius pointed to the Coalition soldiers that moved in photographic quality on the magic scroll. "Find *them*. They are the greatest threat to this part of the offensive."

"Yes, sire. I will focus the search."

He knelt and placed his hands in the pool again...

\* \* \*

"Mayday! Mayday! Swarm inbound!"

That woke Livie up. She was napping using one of her saddlebags as a pillow, letting Sgt. Ventner oversee things for a while. She had been up running patrols all night, she was in charge, and she would nod off for an hour if she damned well wanted to.

She was also on her feet, and then on her bike, so fast that the human eye could barely follow her actions. Livie stuck one finger in the air and made circles, signaling the other scouts to start up their engines. As she secured her helmet, the sound of twenty hovercycles roaring to life was replaced by the panicky voice over the radio, now coming in loud and clear:

“We got Ticks all over us! We’re pulling out! Anyone that can hear this – mayday! Mayday!”

Livie looked down at the comms display on her command bike. Channel fourteen. That would be the survey team up the hill, plotting out sites for observation bunkers. The surveyors had some weapons, of course, everyone working near Xiticix country was armed at all times, but they weren’t soldiers – and they wouldn’t last five minutes against the bugs.

They were three miles away. With a little luck, her scouting element could be there in sixty seconds.

“Centaur Lead to Centaur All! Assault formation! We’re goin’ east on evac route A7! Anyone that can’t keep up ain’t gettin’ paid!”

Most of her scouts were with her at the staging area, a clearing in the trees that they had been using for a few days as a repair center and campground. The others within range surged out of the trees, regrouping with the main body of hovercyclists as it screamed towards the coast and the embattled surveyors.

The woods became a blur around her. Cycles near the edge of the path snapped branches and scattered birds as they rocketed past.

Before she knew it, the hill between them and the surveyors was in sight. Sure enough, the dark shapes of flying Xiticix floated overhead.

Centaur platoon’s hovercycles were loaded with weapons, but momentum was their greatest asset, a fact Livie had learned well in her years among hovercycle gangs before she landed her current steady gig with Task Force X.

“Floor it! Let ‘em have it! No slowin’ down!”

Despite her order to increase speed, the world around her seemed to go into slow motion.

At two-hundred miles per hour, the gently sloping hill might as well have been a ramp. Livie soared skyward, firing off all her mini-missiles in a single devastating salvo. To her left and right, hovercycles flew through the air, pouring gunfire and lasers into the bewildered Xiticix, crashing right through the handful that were directly in the way. One of the bikes exploded in a burst of flame, blotted from the sky, and grasping claws plucked another rider off his seat from above, but most of them were gone before the bugs realized what had happened.

The survey team’s relief became panic as they leapt out of the way of the hovercycles, but the skilled drivers in Livie’s platoon weaved carefully through them. They spun back around, lining up for another pass on the now-scattered flight of Xiticix.

Livie popped a wheelie and tightened her grasp on the handlebars. There was no feeling in the world like getting paid to do what you loved.

\* \* \*

“Nothing yet, sir.” There was a tinge of fear in Gyrus’ voice now.

“Do I have to find another mage? Must I cast you back into the slave pens?”

“I will find them, my lord. Please, I am unfamiliar with this kind of oracle.”

“Is that an excuse?”

Gyrus recoiled as the Demon Prince loomed over him.

“Please, I am so close. Let me keep trying.”

Arvilius said nothing, just furrowed his brow. Gyrus took it as an acknowledgment and turned back to the pool...

\* \* \*



Ty instinctively held his breath as the downdraft from the last immense aircraft blew fine dust and dirt everywhere. Twelve huge ‘Monstrosity’ cargo planes landed one at a time like flying whales gliding out of a sea of dark clouds.

It was an overcast, moonless night. Perfect for the kind of jobs that were Unit 27’s specialty. They were delivery boys, in effect, but you could never tell by the weapons, the nightvision, the crisp, military-style efficiency. There were no ranks in this organization, but if there were, Ty would be a grizzled and decorated sergeant major.

He watched from a hill overlooking the coast near what had once been Toledo. The first two aircraft had already unloaded the massive hovertrain cars they carried, one of which was the locomotive, and they now floated out over the water to clear space on the beach. Through binoculars, he could see several shapes standing in the surf as well; Beachmaster assault robots watching for sea monsters or threats on shore.

They wouldn’t be seeing any action tonight, though. Ty and his scouts had crept up out of the water just after nightfall, concealed themselves amongst the ruins and thick tree growth, and carefully observed the surrounding area. Nothing had moved since they set up their perimeter six hours ago.

Two more train cars linked up with the pair already waiting. The planes that had carried them roared over the beach, blasting the workers trying to coordinate this whole flying circus with a cloud of stinging sand. Another pair of Monstrosities took their place, another set of cars joined the waiting train. A well choreographed dance involving metal behemoths and one-million horsepower engines.

“Sir, radar’s got something.” It was Milliner, a relatively new recruit. Probably just bad weather rolling in...

“Show me.” Milliner turned the display. It was connected to a portable radar unit they had hidden in a particularly tall oak tree nearby.

Five small blips. Obviously moving in tight formation. A Coalition SAMAS patrol if he had ever seen one.

“Pack it up, now. Signal the other watch teams.” Milliner nodded and set to it. Ty took up his radio:

“Control, this is Eyeball. What’s our status?”

The voice on the other end could barely be heard over the rumble of hover engines the size of a house. “...ust waiting on the last two.”

“Disembark now. Tell the package to get moving. They can link up on the road. Charlie-Sierra, repeat, Charlie-Sierra.”

“Got it. We’re out of here.”

Ty saw the hovertrain pull off, heading for the cover of the thick woods and ruined Golden Age skyscrapers inland. The last two train cars chased after it, pushed by a pair of special hovercraft with overcharged engines that were used for just these kind of unforeseen emergencies. The crews stood by at the connectors, waiting to link up the moment they had a chance.



The flight of Monstrosity aircraft was already surging out over the water. They flew extremely low, which blended their radar profile with that of the choppy waves. Despite their size, they would be out of range of the SAMAS's radar within moments. The Beachmaster robots walked backwards into the lake and disappeared.

Ty and Milliner hunkered down two minutes later as the SAMAS patrol rocketed overhead. They swept along the coast, now empty, the blast from the hover engines and aircraft jets having washed the beach clean of every discarded cigarette butt, every piece of trash, every human footprint.

In just seconds they were gone, continuing down the coastline. Ty relaxed; everyone was happy. The Coalition air patrol could go back to base and honestly report that they had seen nothing. Ty's scouts could head back to the submarine that waited for them just offshore. And no one needed to be concerned with the cargo train and its two-thousand tons of treaty-violating arms and armor that would swing north once it was inland, heading directly for New Lazlo.

\* \* \*

"Stop! There! There! That was them!"

"Sire?"

Arvilius jabbed a clawed finger at the magic scroll. "Skulls, black and white armor. Find me more like those fliers we saw. I am growing impatient."

Gyrus was tiring quickly. The effort was taxing his energy, leaving him weak and lightheaded. He gritted his teeth and plunged his arms into the pool up to his elbows...

\* \* \*

First Mate Wallis Rymer clung to the railing of the little cargo ship. Sailing out of Marquette, the *Sea Otter* was a jack-of-all-trades. She carried people sometimes, miners or loggers off to the Keweenaw Peninsula. More often the ship was packed with cargo; dried food and livestock, timber and copper and iron ore. But now, her last job might well be to deliver her crew to a fate worse than death.

The Splugorth slave ship had appeared out of the morning fog. For the last hour she had chased after the *Sea Otter* like a shark, slowly closing the gap between the two ships. The *Otter* had no serious weapons, no armor, no way to defend itself from a determined attacker. And the minions of Splugorth knew it. They had not fired a single shot during the entire pursuit, silently watching from the deck as the distance to their prey diminished. They meant to take the *Sea Otter* undamaged.

Rymer made his way to the bridge. Captain Garnett was still wrestling with the wheel while sweat beaded up on his forehead. Under his capable hand, the *Sea Otter* danced over the waves, using every ripple of water to push herself forward. Unfortunately, the old ship's engines were nothing compared to the Kittani power units on the slaver, and all the crew could do was wait until the first boarding party was upon them.

Motts, the cook and makeshift comms officer, was screaming at someone in Marquette over the ship's radio. Rymer knew it was no use. They were out in the middle of Lake Superior. Northern Gun tried its best to protect its territorial waters, but pirates and scum like the Splugorth roamed the vast expanse of the Great Lakes almost unchallenged.

"We have to turn for shore, Captain! We can't stay out here!" Rymer pleaded.

"If we turn for shore they'll have us for sure. She can't fight against this current."

"Then what the hell are we supposed to do?!"

"You follow *my* orders! Motts, get down to the secondary hatch. Wait for my word."

Motts looked unsteadily at the captain. He was just a kid; the youngest member of the crew. His eyes even watered a bit as he responded.

"It's been an honor serving with y..."

"Get the hell down there, Motts! This ain't the time!"

"Yes, sir."

Motts ducked out the door. He looked back for just a moment, eyes full of fear, then slid down the ladder to the deck below.

"What are you doing, Captain?"

"You know damn well what I'm doing."

"Captain, we can still make it. We could..."

"It's over, Rymer. This old tin can is outta' tricks. And I'll sink her myself before I let the Splugorth get their filthy hands on her."

"You're gonna kill us all!"

Garnett grabbed him by the collar and pointed back at their pursuers.

"And what the hell do you think *they're* gonna do?!"

Rymer glanced back at the captain. The crazed look in his eyes was something Rymer had never seen before. He was serious. But there was something else, too. He could see it over Garnett's shoulder. Something rising out of the water. A ship...

Rymer broke free of the captain's grasp and bolted out onto the deck.

"What...?" was all Garnett could get out.

At the railing, Rymer leaned over, squinting across the lake. Whatever he had seen was gone now. Vanished into the mist.

Garnett yelled from the wheelhouse.

"What is it? Damn it, Rymer, what's out there?!"

For a moment, he thought he could see it again. A huge, ethereal shape. A long, dark hull sliding through the water. But then it was gone.

Aboard the slaver, Y'Ikan, the chief Overlord, was preparing his boarding party. Four Powerlords, a squad of Blind Warrior Women, and a quartet of Tattooed Men – along with a dozen Kittani sailors who were eager to see a piece of the action. More than enough to pacify the little merchant ship. A poor find, really, but it was almost November, and the worsening weather meant the sea lanes were not awash with the easy pickings that had marked the summer. Y'Ikan gnashed his teeth when he thought of the Tolkeenite refugee ship they had captured in June. So many fine slaves, all desperately huddled together in the hold. Those who had jumped over the side to their deaths had been the clever ones.

The Overlord's eyes went wide as a shadowy freighter suddenly loomed over the slave ship, appearing right out of thin air. There was no time to maneuver. The slaver buckled into splinters and sheets of twisted metal. Several of the Kittani sailors were crushed just a few feet in front of him, but Y'Ikan had enough time to throw himself over the gunwale and into the lake. Treading water, he looked up. Across the side of the rusted, ancient freighter were the words "*Edmund Fitzgerald*," painted in stark white. They slid past his eyes as the immense ghost ship pulverized his vessel.

The fourteen men of the *Sea Otter* cheered as they watched the Splugorth slaver break apart and sink. The massive phantom freighter that had rescued them pulled alongside. On her deck, flickering apparitions of the crew moved across the vessel, tending to their posts even in death. One stopped to watch the *Sea Otter* as she went by. The ghostly crewman looked across with his hollow eyes – and smiled as he waved to Rymer, one mariner to another.

\* \* \*

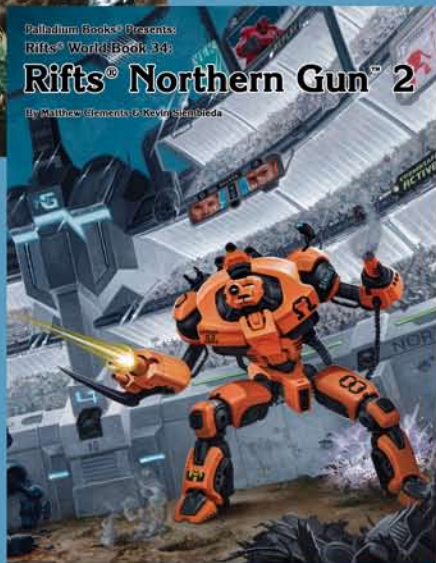
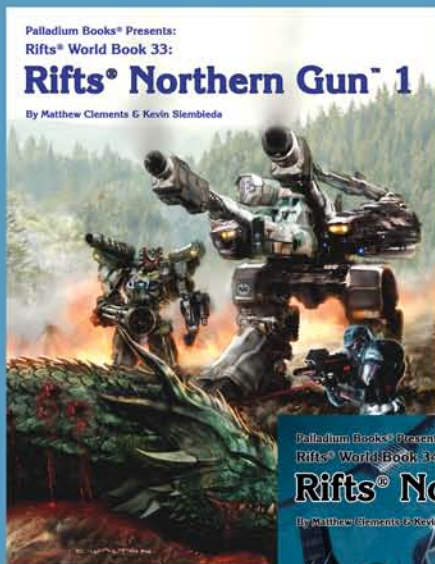
"Black and white, skulls on everything! You know what a skull looks like, don't you?"

"Yes, sire! Please! Please, I can find them..."

Arvilius grabbed the little man and twisted him in two at the waist. He dropped both halves into the pool, then watched in fascination for a moment as the blood swirled and dispersed into the water. The pictures changed as Gyrus' blood reached them though, suddenly showing images of humans in black and white body armor, skull-faced tanks and aircraft, cities built like concrete mountains rising up out of the landscape.

A smile crossed Arvilius' face. He gestured to one of his lieutenants, watching from the doorway.

"Go round up all the locals who have been captured alive. Apparently, this oracle has a thirst for blood. And contact Hell Lord Doom. Tell him I will have the information he needs soon. Once we are done here, we will meet him on Earth."



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