

# SOUL-THIEVES OF MARS



BY H.M. 'DAIN' LYBARGER



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**A**lthough the sun had been up for over two hours, the marketplace remained quiet. Merchants and buyers could be heard milling about, but in a subdued fashion. Argol Beshan found the quiet unnerving, in the same way that he found other things to be unnerving, these days. Blind from birth, Argol Beshan had learned to listen well, and he could hear a difference in his city, these days. He had never been fearful of people, even as a youth. But lately, he had felt the need to belt a dagger on over his tunic whenever he left his dwelling.

By trade a weaver, Argol spent a portion of every morning in the Bazaar listening to the tales of travelers fresh in from the Wastes. Afterward, he delivered finished goods to the shop of an old friend, a merchant who sold his work to the caravan traders passing through the city.

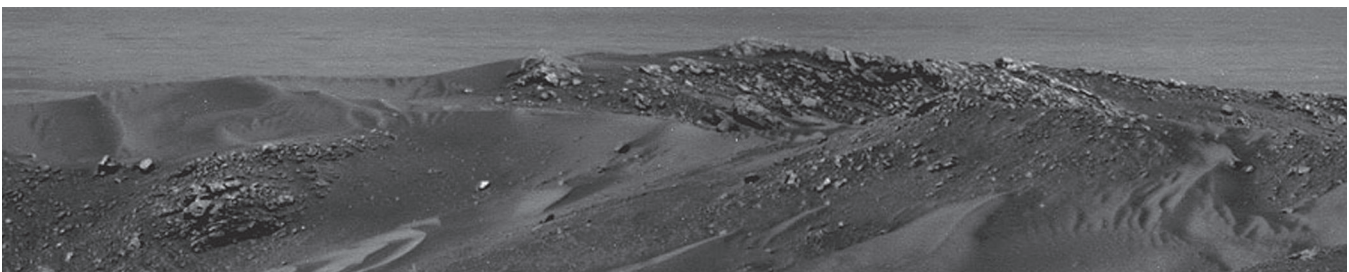
Entering the shop, Argol Beshan paused, feeling the cool of the interior gloom wash over him. Bolts of cloth draped every surface, and hung from the rafters in soft loops, gently muffling every sound. The merchant, Sajal Gax, stood impassively behind the counter.

"I brought some things for consignment..." the weaver said, laying out three intricately-woven bolts of spidersilk on the counter. "Some of my best, don't you think?" he said, running sensitive fingertips across the textured fabric. He waited for his old friend to respond in a deprecating manner, as the first stage of their long-standing haggle over prices, but Sajal Gax said nothing.

"Is everything alright? Have you spoken to the Magistrate?" Argol listened intently, but heard only his friend's shallow breathing.

"Perfectly alright." The merchant's slow response was low and devoid of emotion. "There was no need to speak to the Magistrate. I will pay you nine alvash for these." Each coin clinked with machine-like precision as the merchant counted them out onto the cool marble countertop.

Argol Beshan hurried from the shop, barely remembering to sweep the coins into his hand, and nearly toppling a bolt of cloth from its rack as he fled. Slipping through the door and into the marketplace, he was irrationally certain that he could feel Sajal Gax' hollow-eyed gaze following him.



## INTRODUCTION

This adventure is designed to be inserted into an existing campaign at any of several locations on the surface of Mars. It makes an ideal interlude as a group of PCs travel by caravan from one place to another, and introduces a potential long-term foe for the group which can be the inspiration for many future adventures.

The PCs are assumed to be guards employed by the trade caravan of Tav Golak, or to be independent travellers accompanying his caravan for safety as they traverse the deserts of Mars. If you choose to introduce the characters into the adventure in another way, some of the following details will need to be altered.

## BAN MA TERRIL

Once, the city of Ban Ma Terril was a small but thriving community, built upon the edge of a broad plain that had been a continental shelf. But the passage of time has cost the city grievously. Now it is merely a frontier town, surrounded by the ruins of its former splendor. Only its location at the edge of the Najad Wastes keeps Ban Ma Terril from disappearing completely into the blowing sands of Mars; trade caravans returning from the Wastes stop at the caravansaries of Ban Ma Terril on their way to more populous highland cities.

The central core of Ban Ma Terril has been slowly dying for three generations; many districts no longer have access to radium-power or water service from the core. Those districts are all but abandoned, now. The communication network in the city failed centuries ago, leaving the local government no choice but to fall back upon public bulletins posted on pillars sited throughout the city in order to distribute news to the citizenry.

## THE RESPLENDENT BOWER AMID RUINED MAJESTY

The finest of the three caravansaries in Ban Ma Terril is run by Kothad Tarth and his family. It is at this establishment, the Resplendent Bower Amid Ruined Majesty, that the PCs and their caravan will find lodgings. Tav Golak has no interest in staying at either of the lesser hostels in the city – he has a fine sense of his own worth, and prefers the luxuries afforded at the Resplendent Bower.

The Bower is a two-story building constructed around a large central square, where sand-sailers and other caravan vehicles can park, or where the jalfs of a pack-caravan can be tethered. Just inside the elaborately-fretted bronze gates is an arch-topped

corridor leading to the central square. Doors to the left lead to the common room of the caravansary, doors to the right lead to its mercantile establishment. Individual rooms and suites for travelers range along two of the other three sides of the square on both the first and second floors. Ramps to either side of the main entryway lead to a second floor balcony which wraps around the entire square and provides access to the upper rooms. The ground floor at the back of the building is divided into a series of securely-locking strong-rooms where a caravan's goods can be stored.

The common room is decorated in antique fashion, with items scoured from the ruined buildings of Ban Ma Terril. Delicately-carved tables surrounded by seating-cushions or couches fill most of the floor space. Booths along the walls are draped with thin curtains for privacy. In one corner of the space is a small quarter-circular platform, serving as a stage. Six- and 9-stringed kesht-lutes and an ancient reed-flute lean against the wall here, behind a crystal-chimed xylophonic instrument. Orleix Tarth, the matronly wife of Kothad Tarth, commands the caravansary's cooking and serving staff, and acts as hostess to travelers needing refreshment. She is most often found behind the bar at the back of the room, serving liquor or other intoxicants to the weary.

The trading post of the caravansary is the purview of Kothad Tarth himself, a wiry old trader with gimlet eyes. The racks and shelves of his outfitter's store hold tools, weapons, preserved foods, and other supplies. Virtually anything a caravan might need to traverse the Najad Wastes can be had here, for a price. A locked door at the rear of the trading post leads to Kothad Tarth's office. Radium capsules and other high-priced items are stored in a locked chamber concealed beneath the office floor. A second locked chamber adjacent to the first acts as Kothad Tarth's safe.

Within the courtyard are domed brick ovens used by the kitchen staff, a grain silo holding animal feed, hitching rails, and a row of troughs suitable for watering jalfs. A row of poles provides anchor-points for a thin cloth canopy which can shade the troughs and hitching rails in hot weather. The younger sons of Kothad and Orleix Tarth are employed as stable hands; it is their duty to care for and feed the beasts of burden belonging to the caravansaries guests. Amarex Tarth, the eldest son, has some talent with machines; his father makes him available to do maintenance or repairs on guest's vehicles. He otherwise acts as major domo of the establishment, seeing to the disposition of guests, goods, and gear.

The rooms at the caravansary range from suites suitable for caravan-masters or master traders, to smaller rooms on the upper floor, with two or four hanging-beds each. The upper floor at the back of the

structure is given over to four large 'bunkrooms', each large enough for a dozen or more caravan drovers to hang hammocks. The first floor rooms have no windows piercing the outer wall; they receive natural light only from the courtyard. The second floor rooms have narrow windows facing the surrounding streets, closed with slatted wooden shutters.

## ARRIVAL

Tav Golak's caravan will enter Ban Ma Terril along the canal-road and come to the Resplendent Bower, situated among the ring of ruins that surrounds the occupied center of the city. Perhaps the caravan is preparing to enter the Najad Wastes to trade with the nomads there, or perhaps they are returning from such an expedition, laden with scavenged items and raw metals.

In either case, they will find a warm welcome at the caravansary. Amarex Tarth, dressed in his finest robe, will greet caravan master Golak as if they are old friends, and begin dickering about prices for storage of gear, fodder for animals, and rooms for the caravan's drovers during their stay in Ban Ma Terril. The caravan master intends to stay in town for several days, dealing, trading, and making preparations, so he will bargain hard for a 'package discount'. Amarex will call his father out to handle that negotiation; this is an opportunity for the PCs to meet, or at least observe, some of the establishment's staff.

If the PCs are employees of the caravan, they will wind up in four-person rooms on the upper floor, paid for by the caravan master. If they are independent travelers, they can negotiate with Amarex Tarth themselves for lodging.

## TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS

Either that evening, or the following day, the caravan master will arrange to purchase water for the next leg of the caravan's journey. If the PCs are employees of the caravan, Tav Golak will delegate that task to them. If they are independent travelers, they will need to purchase water and traveling supplies for themselves.

The water-seller's establishment is across a dusty street from the caravansary, built into the partial shell of a collapsed tower. The curving front wall of the ruin has been carefully burnished and restored, allowing the decorative fluted carving of the façade to gleam once more in the sunlight reflected by the water in the canal. Behind that exotic front lies a building of purely utilitarian design – rough rectangular stone blocks quarried from the ruins and mortared together with pinkish mortar made from lime and local sand. There are three large metal storage tanks, and a radium-powered pump that

slowly draws water from the adjacent canal to fill them. Korradan Sharva, the water-seller, is an affable man, and well aware that what he sells is only of moderate value here in town, but worth its weight in gems out in the Wastes. He sets his prices accordingly, and has a take-it-or-leave-it attitude that is quite different from the incessant haggling practiced by merchants in the bazaar.

Meeting the water-seller now will be important to the plot of the adventure later. When engaging in dialogue or barter as Korradan Sharva, make sure that both his easygoing friendliness and his personal vanity about his clothing – and especially his indigo-dyed turban – are noticed by the players. Displaying the water-seller's personality to the PCs now will make future events all the more disturbing for them.

## A PECULIAR REQUEST OVER DINNER

The merchants of Ban Ma Terril frequent the caravansary's common room when there is a caravan in town, making contacts and arranging for trade. That evening, when the PCs are dining in the common room, they will be approached by a nervous-seeming city resident.

Argol Beshan is dressed in the local fashion, with a loosely-wrapped turban of twisted yellow cloth and a textured vest of green damask. A pair of dark lenses held in wire frames shields his eyes. The lenses are quite obviously opaque. He wears a narrow-bladed dagger on his belt. He will introduce himself as a weaver, and inquire about the PCs travels – he selected them because their speech marked them as foreign to Ban Ma Terril, but he will be very circumspect in his conversation, until he is certain that they are newly arrived and have never been in the city before. Once the PCs have established to Argol Beshan's satisfaction that they are strangers, he will ask them for a small favor...

Leaning close over the table to speak, Argol Beshan's voice will drop to a near-whisper. "Something is going on in this city. I have lived here all my life; but lately, this past season, people have begun to act... strangely... Not everyone, only a few – but more every day. I mentioned it to a friend, Sajal Gax, who sells some of my work. He believed me; he said that he would ask some questions... He said that he would even speak to the Magistrate and ask for an official investigation, if anything came to light... Now, he's a different man – as hollow as the others!"



The PCs may not at first believe the weaver, but he will ask for a chance to prove what he says. He will give them directions to Sajal Gax's shop, and ask them to speak to the merchant for themselves.

Argol Beshan will ask to meet with the PCs again the following afternoon, once they have had a chance to check out his story.

Why would the PCs take this on? Beshan can pay them, if they ask, but not much – he is in no way wealthy. They may perhaps take pity on a disabled individual, or they may be suitably heroic and offer assistance simply because he is a person in distress, looking for proof that he isn't just imagining it all. If they don't agree to assist the weaver, they will no doubt feel some guilt as events unfold...

## INVESTIGATING THE MERCHANT

Sajal Gax is a merchant with an establishment in a building on the perimeter of the city's central bazaar. He is primarily a dealer in cloth, but his wife acts as seamstress as well, so there are finished robes, cloaks, and tunics on display behind the white marble counter. Bolts of cloth in a variety of colors and weaves stand on racks, and diaphanous spidersilks (many woven by Argol Beshan) hang in drifting loops from the ceiling. The interior of the shop is cool and dimly lit by sunlight filtering past the spidersilks from skylights in the high ceiling.

The merchant speaks in a low, solemn monotone. He conducts his business quietly, and does not haggle with customers. He sets a price (a fair one, considering the quality of his merchandise) and that is that. His wife also works in the shop, and shares his speech mannerisms. This is all a bit unusual, but perhaps the couple is simply eccentric... With a Success on a Notice roll, one of the PCs will realize that Sajal Gax's eyes never focus on anything or anyone, and his expression remains blank at all times. A Raise on the roll will reveal that the merchant's wife also never changes expression – and they never speak to one another, even though their actions coordinate perfectly.

If any of the PCs ask Sajal Gax about Argol Beshan, he will look at them blankly, as if he has never heard the name before. If the PCs prompt him with the information that they are speaking of an old friend of his, he will nod and agree that he knows him. It will quickly become apparent that Sajal Gax is merely following the leads dropped by his questioners, and telling them what they expect to hear.

If the PCs attempt to run some 'experiments', allow them to find out some of the additional parameters of

what is affecting the merchant. Attempts to steal from the shop are likely to succeed, for example. Even if Sajal Gax sees the theft, he will take no action against the perpetrator unless there is another customer in the shop. The merchant and his wife will not exhibit any emotions, even if directly insulted. If the PCs go so far as to strike one of them, they will fight defensively and attempt to escape. They will not, however, raise an alarm or shout for help, as any normal merchant might.

When the PCs leave the establishment, they will get the unmistakable impression that both the merchant and his wife are staring blankly at them as they leave.

## INVESTIGATING THE MAGISTRATE

Since Sajal Gax was going to speak to the Magistrate, the PCs may jump to the conclusion that the Magistrate caused the peculiar alteration in Gax's behavior, and seek an audience with him.

The Magistrate runs the local city government from a building referred to as the Tiled Palace, because of the complex tessellated tile-work which adorns its walls. Given the current state of Ban Ma Terril, only a dozen or so civic functionaries are needed – the vast majority of the building remains empty. Apart from the civil government offices, the only other occupants of the Tiled Palace are the Civic Guardians, city police who maintain their headquarters in one wing of the structure. An attempt by the PCs to speak to the Magistrate will at first be deflected by an obsequious red-robed functionary, but presuming that they come up with a reasonable excuse for their request, the functionary will reluctantly agree to allow the meeting. After a frustrating wait in an ante-room, they will be admitted into the Magistrate's presence.

Ban Ma Terril has not been an independent city for many centuries. It is beholden to a more powerful local city for its defense and governance. The local Magistrate is appointed by that ruling city. Depending upon where you wish to place Ban Ma Terril in your campaign, the nature of the government may vary: If the ruling city is part of the Kingdom of Callor Maralan, the Magistrate will most likely be a just and fair ruler. If the ruling city is part of the Baltan Confederacy, the Magistrate may well be corrupt, devious, and self-serving. If you choose to place Ban Ma Terril in an even more remote part of Mars, the persona of the Magistrate might be virtually anything; but regardless, his reputation and history will reflect the national character of the city from which he derives his authority.

Now, of course, Magistrate Kelim Tolosa is as devoid of persona and expression as the cloth merchant. He is a thick-necked Red Man of late middle age,

dressed in the fashion of his home city rather than in the turban, vest, and robe common in Ban Ma Terril. He sits impassively on a cushion behind a low fretwork desk in his opulent office. Scrolls and papers litter the surface, but they seem to have been untouched for some time.

Conversation with the Magistrate will be strained. He speaks in vague platitudes if the PCs attempt to raise questions about Sajal Gax, or about Argol Beshan's claim that there is 'something wrong'. He will assure the PCs that Ban Ma Terril is a peaceful city, that the Civic Guardians are always alert to trouble, and that if there were anything to the weaver's claims the Civic Guardians would deal with it. He will end the audience with the statement that he is a busy man, and have the PCs shown out.

As with the cloth merchant, if the PCs attempt to 'experiment' with the Magistrate, they may determine additional parameters of his peculiar condition. If any of the PCs are from the Magistrate's native city, or have traveled there, they may think to ask questions about his background there. Magistrate Tolosa will answer these questions, but he will do so slowly, as if he is searching his memory for information that should, under normal circumstances, be subject to immediate recall. Just like the cloth merchant, the Magistrate will not react to liberties taken with his possessions or the things in his office.

## BLOODY MURDER

The following afternoon, Argol Beshan does not show up at the caravansary as he had promised. This will leave the PCs wondering what the odd business was all about. It won't take long for news to filter in to the common room that a body was found in the bazaar – a man was beaten to death!

The PCs will no doubt suspect that the murder victim is Argol Beshan. Inquiries in the bazaar will prove their suspicions correct. The weaver was found in a gap between two marketplace stalls. Representatives of the Civic Guard have already removed the body, but there are obvious signs of a struggle and a considerable amount of blood in the narrow space. A bloody, tangled strip of twisted yellow cloth is still present – Argol Beshan's turban.

The bazaar is held daily in a square plaza where two main streets cross, not far from the feeder canal that keeps Ban Ma Terril alive. Dozens of tents, stalls, and semi-permanent structures clutter the worn pavement of the plaza, turning it into a maze of narrow passages twisting between the vendor's stalls. When a trade caravan is in town, the bazaar becomes a frenzied den of commerce, as hawkers and merchants vie for the best deals.

The Red nomads of the Najad Wastes are not welcome in Ban Ma Terril en masse, but groups of two or three nomads are often seen in the bazaar, dickering over trade items, or buying and selling jalfs. Civic Guards stroll the bazaar in pairs, wearing pale green silkweave armor and gold wireweave sashes. Their watchful eyes miss little – it seems strange that a murder in broad daylight would have gone unremarked...

Inquiries at the adjacent stalls will turn up no witnesses to the assault. The fruit-seller on one side claims to have closed early, because his stock sold out well before mid-day – he is only present now because the Civic Guardians summoned him back to question him. The dealer in scrap metal on the other side denies seeing anything – in a low, emotionless voice. The two nomads who have been trying to sell him lumps of metal scavenged from the Wastes will merely shrug, and claim that the doings of city-dwellers are no affair of theirs.

Perhaps to the PCs surprise, no one in the entire marketplace seems to have seen or heard a thing. Attempts to question Civic Guardians patrolling the marketplace will be met with suspicion, and counter-questions; "What, precisely, is your interest in the victim? You are not from this city – how do you know Argol Beshan?" Their initial attitude toward the PCs will be Neutral, at best; it will be Unfriendly if the PCs approach them in a suspicious or furtive manner. Successful Persuasion or Streetwise rolls can improve that attitude. If it improves to Friendly, the Civic Guardians will inform the PCs that they are favoring the explanation that 'foreign thieves' must have ambushed the weaver, and killed him when he turned out to have nothing of significant value on his person. If it drops to Uncooperative, the Civic Guardians suspicions may turn toward the foreign PCs instead... Any PC who gets a Success on a Notice roll in the bazaar will spot several individuals who seem to be... hollow. Questions directed at such bystanders will be met with low, calm statements indicating that the individual being questioned saw nothing, heard nothing, and is unaware of anything unusual going on...

If any of the PCs voiced the opinion that Argol Beshan was suffering from paranoia or delusions, this is your chance to make them wonder a bit about themselves. Make sure to describe the various passers-by in the market as either animated and vital or silent and emotionless. Of course, some of the silent, emotionless ones are merely in shock; a brutal murder in the marketplace is an untoward event in Ban Ma Terril.

Once the Civic Guardians have left the scene, and once the PCs have made it apparent to the denizens of the marketplace that they are making inquiries on their own, a single witness will come forward – Garnus Loah. He is a shabbily-dressed man of indeterminate age, and anyone with a Criminal Background Edge will immediately recognize his type: Garnus Loah is a cutpurse and petty thief.

“I saw it happen, my friends – I saw it all! But I don’t want to... entangle myself... with the Civic Guardians. There were five of them, dressed like respectable men and women. The weaver was walking through the stalls, as he often did; I have seen him here many times. Two or three people gathered around the dry fountain over there, watching him. Another pair joined them, and then they struck! The weaver was pulled between the stalls. I heard him shout, and then I could hear them hitting him, kicking him: It was over very quickly.”

Garnus Loah will intimate that he knows the identity of the leader of the gang of murderers, but he will hesitate, blatantly waiting for a bribe. A Success on a Streetwise roll will allow a PC to guess the appropriate ‘service fee’. Once Loah’s greed has been satisfied, he describes the individual in great detail, including his distinctive indigo blue turban; Korradan Sharva, the water-seller!

## A DRY RECEPTION AT THE WATER-SELLER’S

The PCs may decide to check out Garnus Loah’s story, and go to the water-seller’s establishment. They will find Korradan Sharva there, but his manner and personality seem changed. He speaks in a monotone voice, low and flat. He shows no particular sign of

having met any of the PCs before, although he will say that he remembers them if he is asked directly. It will all seem very familiar to the PCs who met Sajal Gax. If asked, the water-seller will deny having any contact with Argol Beshan; in fact, he shows no sign of recognizing either his name or his description. He will also (truthfully) deny knowing Sajal Gax or the Magistrate.

Attempts to ‘experiment’ on Korradan Sharva will bear the same fruit as those on the other victims – he will perform his duties as if he were an automaton going through the motions, and he will not react to unusual actions taken by the PCs unless they become violent, or unless there are ‘normal’ witnesses.

## THE USUAL SUSPECTS

The following day, notice-pillars across Ban Ma Terril will have new bulletins posted, warning that ‘foreign elements’ are suspected of committing criminal acts within the city. Citizens and non-citizens alike are expected to obey all directives from Civic Guardians, and non-citizens will be required to provide proof of legitimate temporary residence within the city, or face immediate expulsion.

The PCs may decide to disguise themselves as locals, adopting the vest-and-turban fashion of dress, or they may opt to remain visibly ‘foreign’. In the latter case, any scene in which the PCs travel through occupied districts of the city will result in their being stopped and questioned by a pair of Civic Guardians.

‘Proof of legitimate temporary residence’ can be had from Kothad Tarth at the Resplendent Bower. If asked, he will provide written receipts to the PCs for their rooms at the caravansary, which will mollify Civic Guardians when the PCs are stopped and questioned.

Vashiben Ashok’s appearance and powers are detailed in the Dramatis Personae section at the end of this adventure. His intentions in Ban Ma Terril are explained here, for ease of reference:

Ashok is a Psion – one of the rare Red Men who possesses mental powers. Like all members of the Order of the Shimmering Pillars he has been trained for years in the mysterious sciences of the mind.

The name of the Order is a reference to the location of their hidden monastery – perhaps it lies beyond a pair of mesas, deep within the Najad Wastes, or perhaps it is concealed beneath the still-shining lights of a city half-buried in sand. Feel free to characterize the monastery in any way that fits your campaign.

Vashiben Ashok has not come to Ban Ma Terril alone. Three other Psions, Apprentices of the Order, have made the journey with him. They have established a secure base of operations in the upper floors of an abandoned tower in an empty district of the ruined city. There, they spend both day and night quietly meditating and joining their mental powers. Backed by the mental emanations of his Apprentices, Ashok can begin to execute his plans. First, he will ‘harmonize’ the city, bringing most of its citizens under his control. Once the city has been placed in a state of efficient and harmonious order, its Magistrate will reap the rewards – and successful Magistrates are transferred to other posts as they rise in rank; posts in larger and more populous cities. Following along, Vashiben Ashok can expand his influence, from one Magistrate to the next. Eventually, control of an entire nation will be within the Psion’s reach...



## A FEELING OF BEING WATCHED

As the PCs cross the bazaar, or while they are on their way from one place to another in Ban Ma Terril, they will feel eyes upon them. Allow each PC a Notice roll. A Success will allow them to spot a cloaked and hooded figure, standing at the edge of the bazaar. He does not appear to be looking at them, but somehow they feel watched... A Raise on any of the Notice rolls will allow the PC to observe that, while the hooded figure does not appear to be looking at them, someone in the crowd always is. When one staring citizen looks away, another turns his blank eyes toward the PCs as they pass.

This should unnerve the players a bit. The cloaked and hooded figure is Vashiben Ashok, a psion and member of a secret monastic Order. He is the cause of the strange events in Ban Ma Terril – although the PCs will not become aware of that for a while yet.

Clever PCs might point out the ‘foreign’ Psion to a patrol of Civic Guardians, thus distracting him and allowing the PCs to escape observation for a time. Alternatively, they may do so just to find out what the mysterious figure will do when approached by the authorities. In that case, Ashok will take advantage of his Invisibility Power to escape the Civic Guardians, revealing its existence to the PCs in the process. Subsequently, he will maintain his observation of the PCs through the use of his Puppets...

## INVESTIGATING THE MYSTERIOUS FIGURE

Any attempts by the PCs to catch, find or follow the mysterious cloaked individual will be difficult: No one knows him, no one sees him, but he is well aware of everything that happens in Ban Ma Terril. The PCs may attempt various stratagems in order to get a look at the man shadowing them, but the advantage will remain his.

Given the growing number of Puppets in town, and Ashok’s ability to see through their eyes whenever he wishes, the Psion’s Notice roll (already a formidable d12) will receive a bonus of +4 as he attempts to avoid the PCs tricks or traps. That, along with his Invisibility Power, should assure that he remains at large, at least for now.

## AN OFFER ONE CANNOT REFUSE

Select the male PC with the highest Smarts (break ties if necessary by the highest total of Persuasion + Notice). This character will be referred to henceforth as the ‘Candidate’, because Vashiben Ashok has decided that he or she is a possible recruit for the Order of the Shimmering Pillars.

At some point when the PCs are separated, perhaps during the cat-and-mouse chase alluded to above, Vashiben Ashok will approach the Candidate. If necessary, he will manufacture a circumstance to separate the Candidate from his companions. Possible methods include; using his Fear power to cause a crowd to panic, having two of his Puppets who are Civic Guardians arrest the Candidate, or having several of his Puppets kidnap the Candidate outright. The selected Candidate will be cornered in (or taken to) a quiet spot in one of the deserted districts of Ban Ma Terril: beneath the echoing dome of a long-abandoned temple atop one of the city’s many empty towers. The Psion will have six Puppets waiting nearby, to discourage any attempt at escape.

The temple is a dome, nearly 80 feet in diameter and arcing to a point 40’ above the center of its circular floor. Slender vertical slit windows, their bases twenty feet up the curved walls, allow pale Martian sunlight into the room, streaking the tiled floors with alternating patterns light and shadow. The main door is low and wide – a twenty-foot long chord cut off one edge of the dome and edged in alabaster. Sliding panels of richly-grained wood close the doorway, and conceal access to the building’s main rampway.

Whatever furnishings or artworks once graced the temple’s interior have long ago been removed, leaving only a thin tracery of pinkish dust. The tracks left by the Psion and his Puppets are the only sign that the temple has been entered in decades.

The building is eighteen stories tall, with a rampway that spirals around the exterior, screened from the elements by a vertically-slitted barrier of grooved stone blocks. Doors from the rampway allow access to each level of the building’s interior. Most of the levels are completely empty now, stripped of everything but their interior walls by generations of Ban Ma Terril’s residents, but some have darkened light-globes or other fittings still in place. One of those levels, the fifteenth, is the current lair of the Psion and his team of Apprentices.

Once Ashok has isolated the Candidate, he will simply appear out of one of the slices of shadow cast by the slit windows, dropping his Invisibility power suddenly for maximum psychological impact. His voice is very quiet, ranging from a whisper to a purr, but it rings throughout the temple dome, seeming to come from all directions. “Do not be alarmed. I mean you no harm.” Ashok will throw back his hood, displaying his features and his dramatic cranial tattoos for the first time. “I am Vashiben Ashok of the Order of the Shimmering Pillars. Centuries ago we were driven into isolation by the narrow-minded fools who rule these decadent cities.” With a dramatic sweep of his arm, he will dismiss not only Ban Ma Terril, but all of Red Martian civilization. “But by abjuring the distractions of the



flesh, and devoting ourselves to the study of the arts of the mind, we have become more than they could ever dream! Our Order is few in number, but mighty in ways that you cannot as yet conceive.” He will circle the Candidate, looking at him from all angles as he walks. “I have been watching you; you alone among all your companions possess the qualities the Order seeks. Today is an auspicious day for you! Today, should you choose, you can set your feet on the path to greatness!”



The Candidate has three choices; he can agree to join the Order, he can decline the offer – and probably lose his soul, becoming another of Ashok’s Puppets, or he can lie, pretending to agree until he can get away from the Psion. Of course, the Candidate will certainly realize that attempting to lie to someone with mental powers might be of significant difficulty... Allow the player a few agonized moments to make his decision, as his character is transfixed by Vashiben Ashok’s impenetrable gaze.

In the unlikely event that the Candidate genuinely chooses to join the Order, Ashok will arrange for him to be transported to the Order’s hidden monastery-citadel the following evening. The GM will have to create suitable follow-on adventures for him, or allow the character to leave the ongoing campaign and become an NPC.

If the Candidate declines the offer, Vashiben Ashok will immediately attempt to use his Puppet power to take control of the Candidate. If Ashok fails to take control, the Candidate will have an opportunity to escape. If Ashok succeeds, the Candidate will be ordered to stand still as the other Puppets bind his arms and legs with spidersilk cord (-4 to Strength or Agility attempts to break free). He will then return the Candidates free will. “That was but the merest demonstration of our abilities. Your mind is strong, but not strong enough to resist one of the Order. I can teach you to be stronger – but first you must desire that strength. Meditate upon your desires overnight; we will speak again tomorrow.” With that, Vashiben Ashok will stride to the sliding doors and exit, leaving the candidate to his thoughts; thoughts, no doubt of attempted escape.

If the Candidate attempts to lie to the Psion, have the player roll Persuasion vs Ashok’s Notice. If he is believed, Ashok’s guard will be down when the Candidate attempts to escape. If Ashok wins the Opposed Roll, he will know the Candidate is lying – but he will play along, pretending to believe that the Candidate has been recruited in order to get him back to the citadel for ‘initiation’... He will silently order his attendant Puppets to care for the Candidate’s needs, and then go to join his Apprentices – leaving the Candidate under constant observation. When the Candidate makes his escape attempt, if any of the Puppets spot him Ashok will use his Puppet Power to try to foil the attempt, as above.

Before the inevitable escape attempt is made, however, cut the scene short, and switch the focus back to the other PCs, who have discovered that their companion is missing...

## HOSTILE EYES

During the search for their missing comrade, the PCs will begin to feel that the city is becoming hostile toward them:

As the PCs cross the plaza, several people in the crowd turn to look at them, following their progress with hollow, expressionless eyes...

A pair of laborers hauling a heavy urn filled with nut-oil pause to turn blank eyes toward the PCs, disregarding the trembling of their own straining muscles...

Turning a corner, the PCs are confronted with a silent group of citizens, all standing motionless. As one, their heads turn to track the PCs movements...

Children mock-swordfighting in the street silently drop their wooden weapons and begin to stare at the PCs as they pass...

Stage each of these moments to encourage a growing sense of paranoia in your players.

The PCs will have no luck tracing the movements of their companion. Any actual information they might glean from eyewitnesses is countered by false information from expressionless citizens with toneless voices...

## MURDERERS BY NIGHT

Vashiben Ashok will not remain idle as the PCs scour the city looking for their friend; he will proceed with his plan. Soon, the entire population of the city will fall under his sway! The Psion will utilize Korradan Sharva the water-seller to observe the PCs movements, and he will contrive meetings between Sharva and other members of the caravan with which they are travelling. One by one, they will succumb to the Psion's mind control. Accompanied by Korradan Sharva, they will come for the PCs in the night, launching an attack upon them as they sleep!

This is the first overt attack against the PCs. Although their paranoia is probably building, they will likely not expect an attack within the confines of the Resplendent Bower. The staging of this fight depends upon the PCs status with the caravan – if they are employees, they will be sharing a room at the rear of the upper floor, above the strong-rooms. If they are independent travelers, they will have rooms in some other location; probably as a group, possibly as pairs or individuals. In any case, Tav Golak, the caravan master, will knock on their door (or doors) late one night, after everyone has had time to go to sleep. If the PCs have become cautious enough to post a

watch, give that character a Notice roll. On a success, he or she can hear that the caravan master is not alone – there are several other people with him on the balcony...

In fact, Tav Golak is backed up by Korradan Sharva and several of the drovers and guards from his caravan. There should be two drovers or guards for each PC. Use the Thug profile on page 170 of the MARS book for the possessed caravan employees. The drovers will be armed with assorted tools used as improvised clubs; the guards will have short swords or axes as weapons.

As soon as a PC opens the door to their sleeping chamber, the Puppets will attack! It is quite likely that the PCs will be caught by surprise; they receive no initiative cards during the first round of the combat unless they get a Success on a Notice roll. If the PCs are sleeping in separate rooms, allow those PCs who are not in the first room under attack a Notice roll to hear the commotion – deal them in on the first round if they are Successful and on the second round if they are not.

### **Korradan Sharva Must Die!**

...and be revived!

Contrive to have Korradan Sharva fall in the canal as he is pursued. If one of the PCs is close to catching him, Sharva might slip while dodging and fall into the water. If one of the PCs hits him with a ranged attack, he might be knocked into the water by the impact, or fall in because of a Shaken result. In any case, appearing to drown, the unfortunate water-seller will drift downstream...

Admittedly, this is blatant railroading in order to set up the following scene and deliver information about the Psion to the PCs. If you prefer a more flexible alternative for your game, there are other ways of delivering the information: Either Korradan Sharva or Tav Golak might be left Incapacitated and Bleeding Out during their assault on the PCs – who, in turn, might treat those injuries, bringing the NPC back from the brink of death. In that case, you will have to re-stage the following scene: The description by the recovered Puppet victim of his encounter with the Psion will come first, and the attack by Sharva's former 'gang' will come later, as soon as he leaves the relative safety of the Resplendent Bower. Alternatively, if both Sharva and Golak are killed, one of the Extras who winds up as 'walking wounded' after the assault can be presumed to have had such a near-death experience that the mind control was broken. His or her account of meeting the Psion will be roughly similar to that scripted for Korradan Sharva.



Tav Golak and Korradan Sharva will flee if they receive a Wound, or if more than half of the Extras accompanying them are taken out of the fight – Vashiben Ashok does not wish to lose such valuable Puppets. The remaining Extras will fight until they are Incapacitated. Upon fleeing, Tav Golak will be dispatched toward the central district of the city, to lose himself among the winding streets there. Korradan Sharva will run toward his place of business across the street. The PCs will likely give chase, in which case the water-seller will take advantage of his Fleet-Footed Edge and attempt to outrun them, fleeing past his business and along the verge of the canal.

Make Aftermath rolls for the Incapacitated Extras as normal. Even if they recover, the Extras are still Puppets of the Psion. In captivity, they will remain passive and unresponsive, regardless of anything the PCs do – until the PCs leave them alone. When and if any Puppets are unobserved they will, to the best of their abilities, attempt to escape and blend in with the citizens of Ban Ma Teril.

## ON THE RUN

If the PCs go looking for Tav Golak or Korradan Sharva the following morning, they will spot the water-seller in the street near the bazaar – fleeing for his life from a group of hollow-eyed citizens!

Use the Thug profile on page 170 of the MARS book for the possessed citizens. There are five men pursuing the water-seller, all with daggers drawn. They appear to be from several different walks of life and professions, but they show no emotions on their faces and they do not speak as they relentlessly pursue their quarry.

Korradan Sharva will make a wrong turn and wind up in a dead-end alley between two partially-ruined buildings, unarmed against five foes. Presuming that the PCs catch up in time, the possessed citizens should not give them much trouble – but they will show no mercy to the water-seller if they remain uninterrupted.

If the PCs rescue Sharva, they will find him panicked and confused, but ‘himself’ once again. Once reassured that the PCs mean him no harm, the water-seller can describe the sensation of having his soul stolen. This can give the PCs valuable insight into how to defend against the Psion.

The water-seller can describe meeting a foreign man wearing a dark gray robe and hood; a casual encounter on a side-street near the marketplace.

“I met his eyes with mine, and his eyes looked strange. They were dark, yet they almost seemed to glow. I

couldn’t break free of his gaze. Then, there was... something... in my mind; something foreign. I could feel alien thoughts, moving through my memory, picking and choosing, sampling my past, my life. I was terrified. I wasn’t paralyzed, but I was so startled by these awful sensations that I never thought of moving... Then, everything was different. Suddenly, ‘I’ was gone. My eyes saw, my ears heard, my hands and feet moved, but without thought. It was like being in a dream; nothing touched me, nothing was real. I saw my body do things, but as if it was doing those things on its own. I felt nothing; even when... even when we killed... It was just a dream.” The denial in his voice is clear; he would rather believe that none of the events he has endured ever happened.

“When I fell into the canal, it was a shock. I started to drown, and it was like waking up. Suddenly, ‘I’ existed again. At first, I thought it had been a dream – all just a nightmare. I dragged myself out of the water, and I wandered in a daze until daybreak. That’s when they spotted me...”

At this point, the PCs should have guessed that Argol Beshan was killed because the Psion could not steal his soul – Argol was unable to see the Psion’s eyes... Any PC who figures this out and makes an effort to avoid eye contact with the Psion will gain a +4 bonus to resisting his Puppet Power – and will suffer a -2 penalty in combat with the Psion, due to keeping his or her gaze averted!

If the PCs take Korradan Sharva back to his place of business (and residence) and leave him alone, he will not last through the day – one or more of Vashiben Ashok’s Puppets will come for him.

## NOWHERE TO HIDE

In fact, they are coming for him now! The PCs have two problems – finding their missing friend, and escaping the growing army of possessed citizens... Wherever the PCs decide to go, they will notice the blank staring eyes of the citizenry tracking them. The few people in Ban Ma Teril who are unaffected have wisely decided to stay indoors. As the day progresses and the shadows lengthen, the feeling of tension in the air will become palpable.

The PCs will begin to notice that groups of people seem to be following them. At first clumps of two or three, then half-a-dozen, then more. If the PCs attempt to run, they will find that around every corner are clusters of other possessed citizens. Base the number of Puppets on the combat abilities of the PCs in your game, but use groups of six or more Puppets per PC as a baseline. Once the PCs recognize that they are in danger of being surrounded, the attack will begin.

Wordlessly, the crowd surges forward, fists and tools raised! Treat the crowd as Mooks, per page 89 of the MARS book. Most are armed with improvised clubs, but some will have daggers or axes. The PCs will discover that individually they are quite easy to defeat. The PCs may also realize that the citizens are innocents – psychotic, dangerous, possessed innocents, but innocents nevertheless. The citizens are victims of the Soul Thieves as much as (or more than!) the PCs themselves. If, during this or any future scene, any of the PCs attempt to disable, disarm, or defeat the possessed citizens without doing permanent harm, award those PCs each with a Bennie for heroism; they are taking on additional personal risk in order to protect the helpless.

If the PCs can defeat the crowd, or win free of the encirclement and disengage, they still face the question of where to go. Returning to the relative safety of the Resplendent Bower is one possible plan; another is to head for Korradan Sharva's establishment.

## MEANWHILE:

While the Psion coordinates his Apprentices in the manhunt for Korradan Sharva and the PCs, the Candidate will have his opportunity to escape. The six Puppets attending to his every need are members of the Civic Guardians, selected by Vashiben Ashok because they are physically fit and able – plus, with the city firmly 'harmonized', Civic Guardians can be spared from their regular duties; there is no crime, after all. When Ashok becomes distracted, the Puppets revert to their 'programmed' behavior, patrolling the temple dome in pairs in a very predictable pattern. In that mode, treat them as Inactive guards. Coming up with an escape plan that includes evading the Puppet's Notice rolls should be easy enough for an enterprising Candidate.

It will be more challenging for the Candidate to link up with his comrades, since he has no idea where they are. So long as he is not spotted by any of the Psion's Puppets, he will be free to move about the city looking for them. Have the Candidate make Stealth rolls, opposed by Vashiben Ashok's Notice ability. Since the Psion can see through the eyes of any of his Puppets at will, his ability is more significant to the contest than that of the individual Puppets.

## REUNION

When the Candidate and his companions reunite, the group can now begin to piece together what is going on. The Candidate's insight into Vashiben Ashok's identity, location, and plans, combined with the knowledge the other PCs have gleaned concerning the effects of his mental powers may give them useful

ideas about how to thwart the Psion's plot. They know where his secret lair is, and they know at least one method of avoiding the effects of his Power...

If the PCs decide to take the fight to the Psion, the Candidate will be able to lead them to the building where Vashiben Ashok lairs. Unfortunately, every eye in the city is on the lookout for them, and virtually every citizen is a Puppet willing to die in order to slay them. Stealth should be the order of the day.

Of course, it is also possible that the PCs might consider Ban Ma Terril a lost cause, and seek only to flee. If that is their goal, they will need to return to the caravansary to retrieve their mounts or vehicles, and then brave either the Najad Wastes or the Canal Road. Vashiben Ashok cannot allow that to occur; the Candidate and his companions now know too much. From the moment that the Psion discovers that the Candidate has escaped, the entire city will be bent upon killing the PCs!

## DEADLY STREETS

Regardless of their eventual destination, the PCs will have to cross Ban Ma Terril, either to reach the relative safety of the Resplendent Bower, or to reach the secret stronghold of their enemy. Make group Stealth rolls for the PCs, opposed by Notice rolls by Vashiben Ashok, looking through the eyes of his many Puppets. Each successful roll will move the PCs closer to their goal. Roll once for each neighborhood or district that the PCs traverse – it will take five rolls for the PCs to cross the city and reach their destination. Allow an occasional +2 modifier for PCs describing good techniques for skulking through the street, but describe each successful Stealth roll as a narrow escape; avoiding the notice of a matron suddenly looking out a window, or the attention of a child standing listlessly in the street.

If the PCs are spotted, the Psion will begin to direct his Puppets toward their location in droves. Run this as a foot chase, using the Chase rules (starting on p. 115 of *Savage Worlds: Explorer's Edition*). Use the same size groups as in the Nowhere to Hide encounter above. Again, treat all the Puppets as Mooks.

Start the first group of Puppets at Medium Range from the PCs as the chase begins. Remember that in foot chases, all participants make Agility rolls to determine their progress. 'Out of Control' results in a foot chase can be worked into the narrative of the pursuit as slips, trips, falls and recoveries. When a Club is dealt for Initiative, the Obstacle is determined as follows:

If heading through the inhabited part of the city, toward the Caravansary: Rough Obstacles (-2 penalty); roll 1d6 (1-4 soft, 5-6 hard). Soft obstacles could be bales



or bundles of goods in the Bazaar, awning support-poles and canopies, or an un-possessed citizen fleeing on his own. Hard obstacles could be fruit-bearing trees, large urns, wooden or stone lattices, or low walls.

If heading through the deserted quarter, toward the Temple: Sparse Obstacles (-1 penalty); roll 1d6 (1-3 soft, 4-6 hard). Soft obstacles could be piles of wind-gathered debris, dry and dead foliage, or heaps of soft sand. Hard obstacles could be rubble-walls, broken masonry, or collapsing pavement.

In addition, each round of the chase, roll 1d6; on a roll of 1 or 2, an additional group of Puppets joins the chase, having been directed into action by the Psion and his Apprentices. Roll 2d4 to determine their initial range from the lead PC.

Groups of Puppets at 0 Range Increments from a PC will make melee attacks. Groups of Puppets at 1 Range Increment will attempt a 'Parallel' Maneuver, sprinting forward with desperate energy in order to make melee attacks.

Groups of Puppets who fall behind by more than 10 Range Increments will drop out of the pursuit. If the PCs can outrun all of the Puppets, they will have reached their destination – but they can be sure that their pursuers are still on their trail!

## CORNERED AT THE CARAVANSARY

If the PCs have headed toward the Resplendent Bower Amid Ruined Majesty, either for protection or because that is where their mounts or vehicles are located, they will be in for a surprise. The caravansary's bronze gates are locked. Attempting to get the attention of someone inside will bring Orleix Tarth to the far end of the arched entryway – armed with a crossbow! Her attitude toward the PCs has become Uncooperative, due to the fighting (and possibly killing) that they brought into her home and workplace earlier. Persuasion will be necessary to get her to unlock the gates. Assume that the PCs have 2d10 rounds before the Puppets they outran start to arrive. They will have that long to negotiate with Orleix Tarth to let them in, using either Persuasion (appeals) or Sreetwise (bribery). Attempting to break down the gate or pick the lock while Orleix Tarth's attitude is Neutral or worse will cause her to fire at the PC making the attempt. When possessed citizens start arriving to attack the PCs, her heart will soften a bit toward them; her attitude will improve by one step.

The caravansary is something of a fortress – it has only one entrance, and the walls are high enough to be difficult to climb. The PCs and the Tarth family

can make a stand inside, at least long enough to saddle jalfs or warm up vehicles. Full stats for Kothad, Orleix, and Amarex Tarth are listed in the Dramatis Personae section at the end of this adventure. Use the Citizen profile on p. 169 of the MARS book for the Tarth's two younger sons.

Once all of the Puppets involved in the pursuit have reached the caravansary, other possessed citizens will begin to arrive. Add another group of Mook Puppets every two minutes. There are hundreds of Puppets in Ban Ma Terril by this point; virtually the entire population has been enslaved. They will crowd the gates, silent yet savage, pounding with their improvised weaponry. They will surround the building on all sides, spreading out as evenly as possible as their numbers swell. Initially, they will not attempt to climb the walls. The bronze gate is Toughness 10, but the lock is only Toughness 8. It won't hold forever...

Defending the caravansary will be the PCs, the Tarths, and perhaps a handful of other citizens or caravan drovers who have remained unaffected. If the PCs explain about eye-contact to their NPC Allies, they will gain the benefits and disadvantages of such knowledge, as listed previously. Otherwise, the defenders are at a high risk of being taken over as Puppets once they come into contact with the possessed. If Orleix or Kothad Tarth is taken, they will be ordered by the Psion to unlock the gate.

If the PCs have decided to flee the city, it won't be too difficult to convince the Tarths and the others to accompany them – once they see the throng of possessed citizens gathering outside. It will take at least ten minutes to saddle jalfs or start powered vehicles; another ten minutes will be required for the Tarths to gather their belongings, plus food and water for the journey. Someone will have to unlock the gate, then the group will have to fight their way through the crowd of Puppets bunched on that side of the caravansary (one-fourth of the total) in order to break out and escape.

Once they are past the crowd, use the Chase rules (now with a Range Increment of 5, because of the mounts or vehicles). Considering the PCs bonus for having a faster Top Speed, and the Puppets penalty for being on foot and thus having a smaller Range Increment, escape should be assured.

The fortress-like nature of the caravansary is a disadvantage to the PCs if they determine that their best course of action is to break out and attempt to attack the Psion in his lair. There is only one entrance – the bronze gate – and the upper floor windows are too narrow for a Martian or a Human to squeeze through. Once the possessed citizens have encircled the building, it will be difficult to

get over the wall without being spotted. Worse, once the PCs are seen on the roof, the Puppets will begin trying to climb the outer wall. Arranging for a diversion of some sort to attract possessed citizens to one side of the building might allow the rest of the PCs to make it over the wall unobserved on another. From there, the situation is as it was in the Deadly Streets encounter above – use group Stealth rolls to represent the PCs sneaking through the streets, and convert to the Chase rules if and when they are spotted. This time, of course, the Psion will be drawing some groups of Puppets away from the caravansary to follow the PCs. This will allow the defenders to hold out a little longer.

If the PCs split up in this manner, run the remainder of the adventure in parallel, cutting back and forth between the two scenes. Once both groups are engaged in combat, deal initiative cards for both battle scenes simultaneously, and play it out as one engagement split across two locations to maximize the tension.

## RAIDING THE TEMPLE

Presuming that the PCs outrun (or out-Stealth) the Puppets pursuing them, they will have 2d10 rounds of free action in the vicinity of Vashiben Ashok's tower before they are interrupted by the hordes of possessed citizens he will summon to his aid. The Psion and his Apprentices have moved into the fifteenth floor of the tower, which suits their sense of monastic austerity; the entire floor has been stripped of all furnishings and fittings, leaving it a bare circular expanse, eighty feet in diameter and twenty feet high. A ten-foot diameter pillar of silver-blue metal lies at the center of the room – it is the stripped-bare support column for the entire building, running up through the middle of every floor except the rooftop temple.

Near the pillar are four neatly made-up pallets, with thin cloth blankets and simple wooden headrests. Equally simple cooking gear and a portable stove are arranged a short distance away, neatly stacked after the Apprentice's last meal.

The Apprentices will be kneeling, facing one another, heads bowed and foreheads almost touching when the PCs enter. Vashiben Ashok will be Invisible, on the far side of the metal pillar from the doorway. Any of the six Civic Guardian Puppets who survived the Candidate's escape will be present as well, arrayed on either side of the entrance doorway with their backs to the wall.

If the PCs have managed to arrive at the tower without being seen by any Puppets – by sneaking out of the caravansary while it is under siege, for

example – the Civic Guardians will still be on the eighteenth floor, and the Psion will not be in his 'ready' position.

When the PCs enter, the Civic Guardian Puppets will attack, and Ashok will maneuver into a position where he can use his Fear and Puppet Powers to against the PCs. The Apprentices will remain meditating and controlling the Puppets in the city, drawing groups of them toward the tower to bring down the PCs. Once any Apprentice is attacked, all of them will rise and begin to emulate Ashok's tactics against the PCs. This will cause the Puppets in the city (and any in the tower) to revert to their 'programmed' behavior; they will go about their daily business, 'harmonized' and efficient. In other words, they will cease to relentlessly pursue the PCs!

If things go badly for him, Vashiben Ashok will attempt to maneuver past the PCs and flee with as many of his Apprentices as he can. Given his position, success is unlikely if the PCs are feeling vengeful. Should the Psion escape, the PCs can be certain that they will meet him again someday.

## THE COLD GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN

Whether the PCs defeat the Soul Thieves, or merely escape from Ban Ma Terril with their souls and minds intact, one fact remains: The Order of the Shimmering Pillars will still be out there, secretly plotting. As far as the PCs are concerned, the Order's internal unity or division can only be guessed at, and their eventual goals are conjectural at best: Vashiben Ashok may well have been lying to the Candidate at any of several points. There is no way for the PCs to be certain of anything they have learned...

One way to characterize the Order of the Shimmering Pillars is to treat the Psion and his Apprentices as a renegade element. Most members of the Order are in fact peaceful, meditative psychics who are inward-looking and non-violent.

Alternatively, Vashiben Ashok may be much more representative of the Order; just a little too ambitious and prone to premature action. If he represents the 'militant' portion of their society, what might the 'cool, patient, devious' minds of the other faction be planning for the future of Martian society – and how will they react to the knowledge that someone out there knows the secret of their existence?



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

### **Tav Golak**

A well-to-do veteran of many ventures into the Najad Wastes, caravan master Tav Golak cuts a striking figure with his warrior's harness and gold-embroidered eye-patch. Of common birth, he has used his natural charm and personal daring to become an independent trader. The tale of how he lost his eye in a fight with the Green Men grows more elaborate each time he tells it.

**Attributes:** Agility: d6 Smarts: d8 Spirit: d8  
Strength: d6 Vigor: d4

**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d6 Survival: d10 Notice:  
d8 Persuasion: d8 Riding: d8

**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 5

**Toughness:** 4

**Hindrances:** One Eye, Cocky

**Edges:** Command, Combat Reflexes

**Gear:** Eyepatch, Shortsword (Str+d6), Dagger  
(Str+d4)



### **Kothad Tarth**

A sharp-eyed merchant with a heart of flint, Kothad Tarth drives a hard bargain with his customers, but dotes on his family. No longer a young man, he gets winded easily, but he refuses to give in to infirmity. His graying hair is usually covered by a dark turban and neck-cloth, encircled at the brows with silver wire.

**Attributes:** Agility: d8 Smarts: d8 Spirit: d8  
Strength: d6 Vigor: d4

**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d8 Intimidation: d6 No-  
tice: d8 Persuasion: d8 Riding: d8

**Charisma:** +2 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 5

**Toughness:** 4

**Hindrances:**

**Edges:** Connections

**Gear:** Radium Pistol (Range 12/24/48, Damage  
2d6+1, AP3)

### **Orleix Tarth**

Orleix Tarth is a stout woman, with dark hair beginning to go grey. She wears light-colored robes in a layered style, as befits a matron. She is known for her sharp tongue, and no-nonsense attitude. When mediating disputes in the caravansary's common room, her fierce scowl has caused many a drunken nomad or caravan drover to back down from a fight.

**Attributes:** Agility: d6 Smarts: d6 Spirit: d8  
Strength: d6 Vigor: d6

**Skills:** Fighting: d4 Guts: d4 Intimidation: d10 No-  
tice: d6 Persuasion: d6

**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 4

**Toughness:** 5

**Hindrances:**

**Edges:**

**Gear:** Crossbow (Range 15/30/60, Damage 2d6,  
AP2) (normally kept under the bar)

### **Amarex Tarth**

Oldest of three children, Amarex Tarth will inherit the caravansary one day – he already takes a proprietary interest in the running of the family business. Although he has secretly dreamed for years of traveling with the caravans, he has put aside such 'childish ambitions' in favor of being a serious businessman.

**Attributes:** Agility: d8 Smarts: d8 Spirit: d6  
Strength: d6 Vigor: d6

**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d6 Intimidation: d6  
Notice: d6 Persuasion: d8 Riding: d6 Driving: d6  
Repair: d8

**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 5

**Toughness:** 5

**Hindrances:**

**Edges:**

**Gear:** Battleaxe (Str+d8)



## ☀ Korradan Sharva

A Red Man of late middle age, Korradan Sharva wears his dark hair short, and covered by a two-lobed turban, a fashion common in the region near Ban Ma Terril. He displays great ostentation in his dress; his turban is dyed indigo blue, a rare and expensive color to produce on Mars. Korradan Sharva is a thin and wiry man, both stronger and faster than he looks due to a lifelong career of hauling water and maintaining pumps.

**Attributes:** Agility: d8 Smarts: d6 Spirit: d6  
Strength: d8 Vigor: d6  
**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d4 Intimidation: d4  
Notice: d8 Persuasion: d8 Riding: d8 Driving: d4  
**Repair:** d6  
**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 8 **Parry:** 5  
**Toughness:** 5  
**Hindrances:** Quirk (Vain)  
**Edges:** Fleet-Footed  
**Gear:** Battleaxe (Str+d8)



## Argol Beshan

A weaver by profession, Argol Beshan has long nimble fingers which suit the precision nature of his trade. His muscular arms show that operating a loom is hard physical labor. His eyes, when they can be seen behind his concealing lenses, are milky white, the irises devoid of all color. Argol Beshan has been blind since birth.

**Attributes:** Agility: d8 Smarts: d6 Spirit: d6  
Strength: d8 Vigor: d6  
**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d8 Intimidation: d6 No-  
tice: d6 Persuasion: d6 Riding: d8  
**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 5  
**Toughness:** 5  
**Hindrances:** Blind  
**Edges:** Alertness  
**Gear:** Dagger (Str+d4)



## Sajal Gax

Sajal Gax is tall and lean, with normally-piercing dark eyes. His hair is shoulder-length, and normally held back from his face by a braided cord when he is indoors. Outdoors, he wears a turban of white cloth.

**Attributes:** Agility: d6 Smarts: d8 Spirit: d6  
Strength: d8 Vigor: d6  
**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d8 Notice: d10  
Shooting: d6 Persuasion: d8  
**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 6  
**Toughness:** 6  
**Hindrances:**  
**Edges:**  
**Gear:** Shortsword (Str+d6)

## Civic Guardians

The Civic Guard of Ban Ma Terril wear pale green silkweave armor with gold piping and gold wireweave sashes. They are equipped with bracer shields bearing the ancient crest of Ban Ma Terril, single-shot Handbows, and bronze-hilted short swords; but most prefer to maintain order in the bazaar with their fists as a first resort.

**Attributes:** Agility: d6 Smarts: d6 Spirit: d6  
Strength: d6 Vigor: d6  
**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d6 Notice: d6  
Shooting: d6 Stealth: d6 Intimidation: d6 Riding: d6  
**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 5  
**Toughness:** 5  
**Hindrances:** Stubborn  
**Edges:**  
**Gear:** Silkweave (Armor +2), Bracer shield, Short-  
sword (Str+d6), Handbow (Range 5/10/20, Damage  
2d4)



## **Vashiben Ashok**

*Vashiben Ashok is, in appearance, a healthy and strong-featured Red Man. His only distinctive characteristic is his shaved head, and the intricate purple tattoos across his scalp. His eyes are dark, behind heavy lids – but when he looks directly at someone, they become almost luminous. His voice is low-pitched and vibrant, compelling to listen to. Ashok wears a dark gray cloak and cowl made of fine spider-silk, with a patterned hem.*

**Attributes:** Agility: d8 Smarts: d12 Spirit: d8 Strength: d6 Vigor: d6

**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d8 Intimidation: d10 Notice: d12 Persuasion: d12 Riding: d8 Psionics: d12

**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 6

**Toughness:** 6

**Hindrances:** Vow (total loyalty to the Order of the Shimmering Pillars)

**Edges:** Alertness, Command, Arcane Background (Psionics) Power Points: 20; Puppet, Fear, Invisibility

**Gear:** Dagger (Str+d4)

**Note:** *Ashok's Puppet Power is the 'villainous option' of that ability – far more powerful and wide-reaching than the version available to PCs. The Power's Duration is permanent, so long as Ashok lives, and when used against NPCs it costs no Power Points. The victim of the Power must lock eyes with Ashok to be affected. Ashok is telepathically linked to all his Puppets, and can see what they see. Even worse, with concentration he can use the Puppet Power remotely, through the eyes of any of his Puppets! Ashok can voluntarily 'return the soul' of one of his victims by gazing into their eyes and releasing his control over them. A near-death experience, or an actual death and immediate resuscitation, may also return a victim's free will.*



## **Apprentice Psions of the Order of the Shimmering Pillars**

*Their appearance is similar to Vashiben Ashok's. Their scalp tattoos are less complex, indicating that they are mere apprentice. Each wears a dark gray cloak and cowl like their master's, although without the patterned hem.*

**Attributes:** Agility: d6 Smarts: d8 Spirit: d6 Strength: d6 Vigor: d6

**Skills:** Fighting: d6 Guts: d8 Intimidation: d8 Notice: d10 Persuasion: d10 Riding: d8 Psionics: d10

**Charisma:** 0 **Pace:** 6 **Parry:** 6

**Toughness:** 6

**Hindrances:** Vow (total loyalty to the Order of the Shimmering Pillars)

**Edges:** Arcane Background (Psionics) Power Points: 10; Puppet, Fear, Invisibility

**Gear:** Dagger (Str+d4)

*Members of the Order use a modification of the Puppet Power for telepathic communication amongst themselves – in addition, they can share the duties of controlling their Puppets through meditation. Without the support of his meditating apprentices, Ashok's Puppet Power reverts to the 'standard' version.*