

WORLD OF DARKNESS: DEMON HUNTER™



A WORLD OF DARKNESS SOURCEBOOK FOR VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE®



I UNDERSTAND
YOU HAD AN EVENTFUL
EVENING, TOMORI.

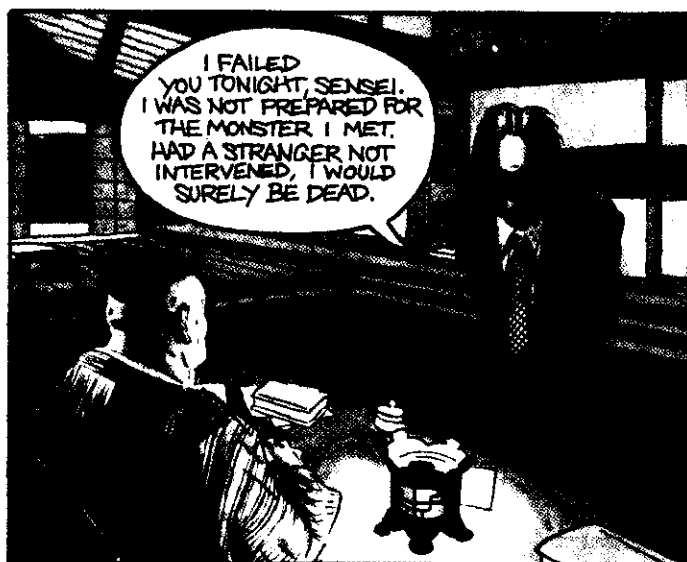
PLEASE
ENLIGHTEN
ME.

TELL
ME WHAT
OCCURRED.

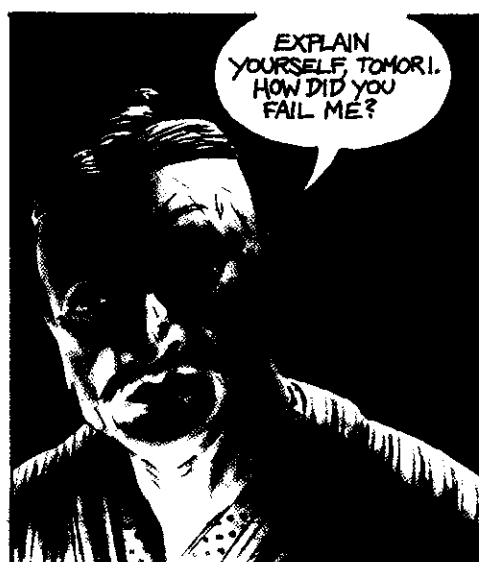
YES,
SENSEI.

I ENCOUNTERED
A THREAT FAR GREATER
THAN THE MERE DRUG
LORD I EXPECTED
TO MEET.

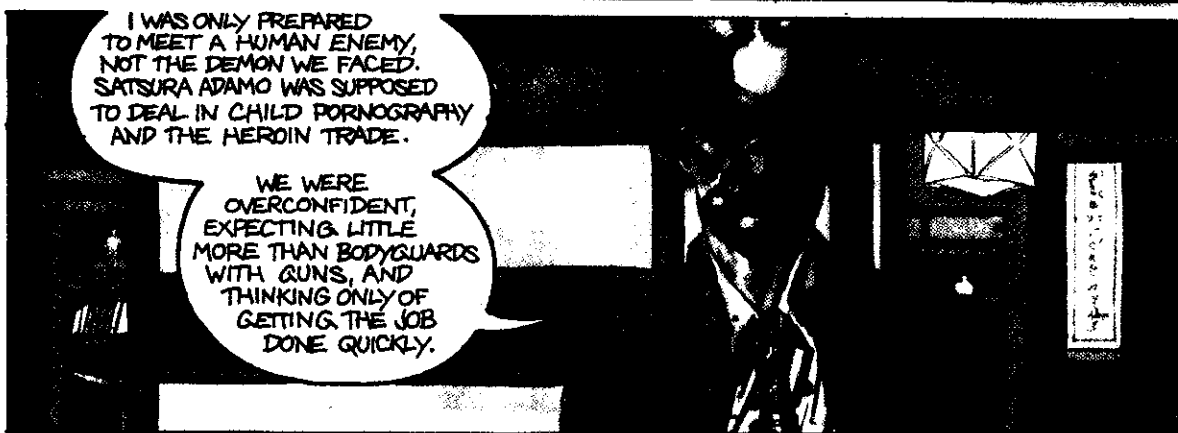
DEMON HUNTER CROSSING



I FAILED
YOU TONIGHT, SENSEI.
I WAS NOT PREPARED FOR
THE MONSTER I MET.
HAD A STRANGER NOT
INTERVENED, I WOULD
SURELY BE DEAD.



EXPLAIN
YOURSELF TOMORI.
HOW DID YOU
FAIL ME?



I WAS ONLY PREPARED
TO MEET A HUMAN ENEMY,
NOT THE DEMON WE FACED.
SATSURA ADAMO WAS SUPPOSED
TO DEAL IN CHILD PORNOGRAPHY
AND THE HEROIN TRADE.

WE WERE
OVERCONFIDENT,
EXPECTING LITTLE
MORE THAN BODYGUARDS
WITH GUNS, AND
THINKING ONLY OF
GETTING THE JOB
DONE QUICKLY.

THAT'S SATSURA
ADAMO? THE THREAT
WE'VE HEARD SO
MUCH ABOUT?

HE LOOKS
HARMLESS!

YOU KNOW
BETTER THAN
THAT.

EVEN THE WEAKEST
MAN NEEDS ONLY
INFLUENCE AND MONEY
TO RULE.

WE LOOKED, BUT SAW
NO GUARDS. THAT
SHOULD HAVE BEEN
WARNING ENOUGH.

YOU ARE VERY
PUNCTUAL. I RESPECT
THAT. SHALL WE
COMMENCE WITH
OUR BUSINESS?

WE NEED
TO SEE THE
MERCHANDISE
BEFORE WE
PAY.

NOTHING
PERSONAL.

NATURALLY.

IS THIS
PURE?

DON'T INSULT ME.
I HAVEN'T STAYED IN
BUSINESS THIS LONG
BY BEING A CROOK ...

JUST A
DEALER.

VERY
GOOD.

SATSURA ADAMO,
YOU ARE UNDER ARREST
FOR TRAFFICKING
ILLEGAL NARCOTICS.

WHAT?!

THIS IS
SALT.

IT'S
JUST FINELY
POWDERED
SSAAAAA!

NATURALLY.

WHAT SORT
OF IDIOT DO
YOU THINK
I AM?



WE ATTACKED
THE MONSTER.

THERE WAS NO
PLANNING, NO INTENT,
OTHER THAN TO
DESTROY IT.

URISA DIED
NEXT.

I HEARD THE
SOUND OF
HIS CHEST
EXPLODING.

IT WAS LIKE THE
SOUND OF A TREE
SPLITTING IN TWO.

AAIEE!!
MY LEG!

HAH
HAH
HAH

NOW I HAVE
YOU, WOMAN!
TELL ME WHAT
I WANT TO KNOW
OR DIE
SLOWLY!

NEVER!!!

ZIRABA

AAAAARRGH

THEN YOU
DIE NOW!!

Thop

OHH

NO.

Nnnnnngh...

I KNEW I WAS DEAD. THERE WAS NO WAY I COULD REACH THE GUN IN TIME.



AND THEN OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE I SAW HIM COMING.



HIS MOVEMENTS WERE PRECISE, FLUID, AND



VERY

VERY

FAST.

LIKE A TIGER...

GOING FOR THE KILL!

THANKS TO THE STRANGER'S ATTACK...

I WAS ABLE TO FREE MYSELF...

STRABA

AND DEFEND MYSELF.

FOR EVEN WHEN CUT FROM ADAMO'S BODY

THE SNAKE-LIKE LIMBS ATTACKED ON THEIR OWN.



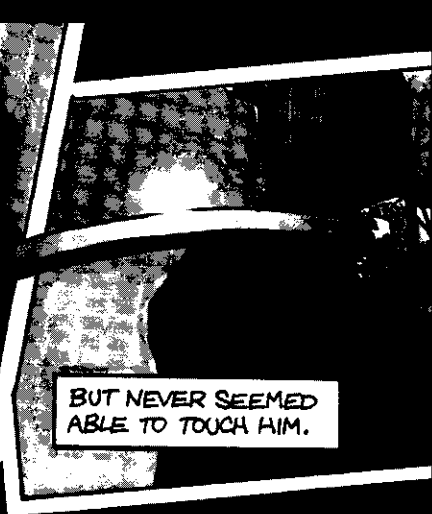


THE DEMON SWUNG AT HIM.

AGAIN



AND AGAIN.



BUT NEVER SEEMED ABLE TO TOUCH HIM.



I FELT LIKE A FLY TRAPPED IN TREE SAP, AS I TRIED TO LOAD THE SPECIAL AMMUNITION WE SAVED FOR SUCH EMERGENCIES.

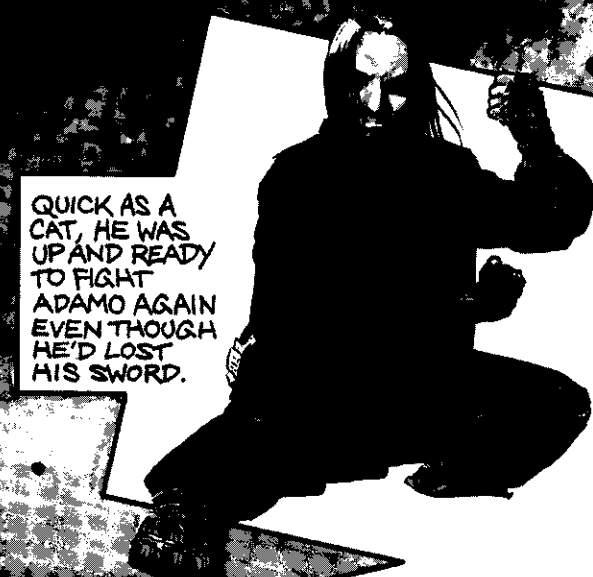


THE MONSTER FINALLY MANAGED TO HIT MY STRANGE DEFENDER.

THE MAN'S ENTIRE BODY SHOOK FROM THE IMPACT.



I BELIEVE THE BLOW WOULD HAVE BROKEN A STONE WALL, BUT THE MAN TWISTED AND ROLLED AS HE FELL.



QUICK AS A CAT, HE WAS UP AND READY TO FIGHT ADAMO AGAIN EVEN THOUGH HE'D LOST HIS SWORD.



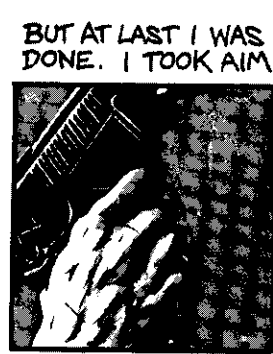
I COULD BARELY BELIEVE MY EYES.



I WATCHED WHILE THE DEMON ATTACKED AGAIN, WISHING MY HANDS WERE FASTER.



PRAYING I COULD SAVE HIM.

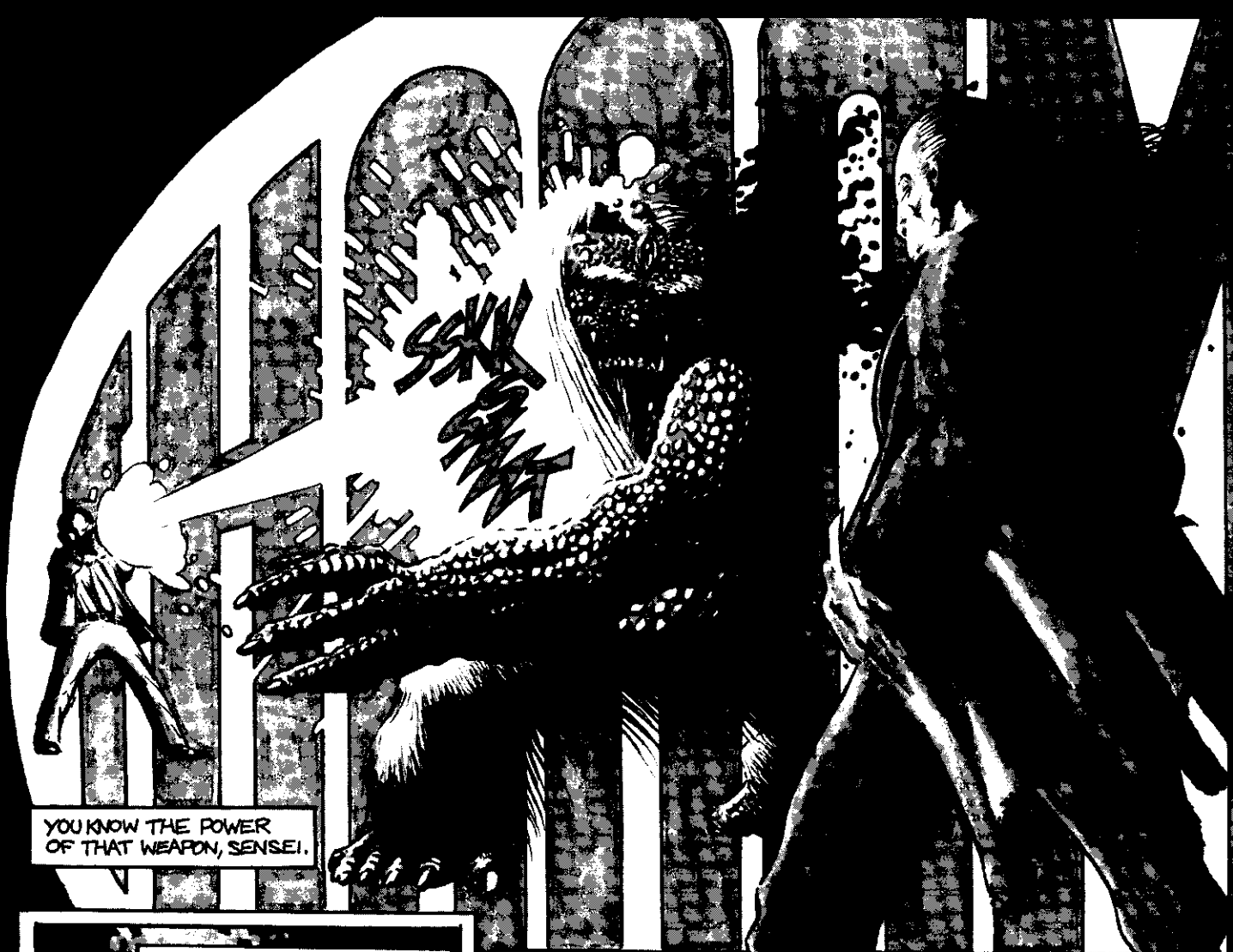


BUT AT LAST I WAS DONE. I TOOK AIM



AND FIRED!

BOOM



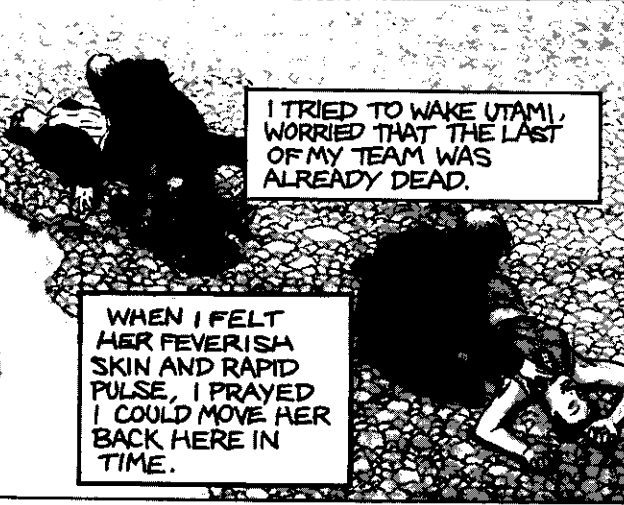
YOU KNOW THE POWER
OF THAT WEAPON, SENSEI.

THOUGH I SHOT ADAMO AT
POINT-BLANK RANGE, HE
STILL REACHED FOR THE
STRANGER. I WAS READYING
ANOTHER SHOT, BUT THE
STRANGER WAS FASTER.

HIS WRITTEN PRAYERS MOVED ON
THEIR OWN, ATTACKING ADAMO
LIKE A FOREST OF FLYING KNIVES.

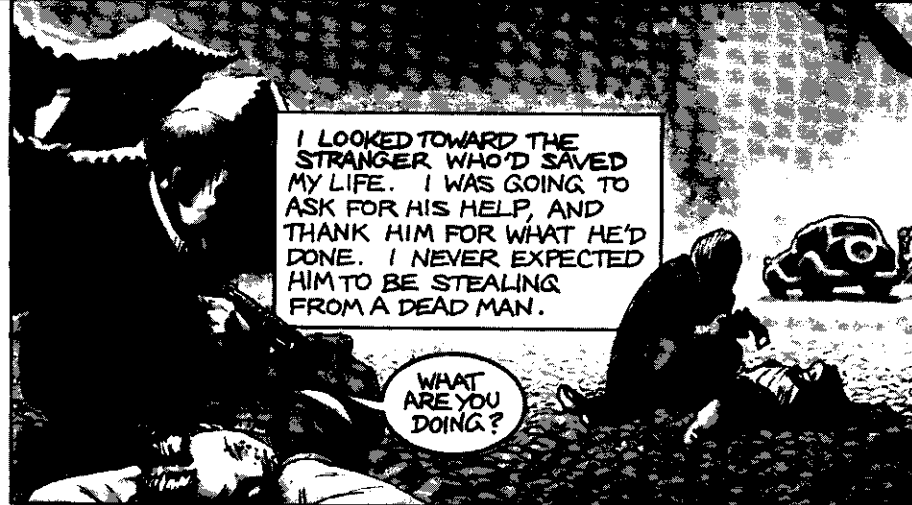
AS THE STRANGER
WHISPERED, THE DEMON
BEGAN TO BURN WITH
WHATEVER SORCEROUS
SPELL THE MAN CAST.

ADAMO DIED
IN A BONFIRE
OF UNNATURAL
ENERGIES.



I TRIED TO WAKE UTAMI,
WORRIED THAT THE LAST
OF MY TEAM WAS
ALREADY DEAD.

WHEN I FELT
HER FEVERISH
SKIN AND RAPID
PULSE, I PRAYED
I COULD MOVE HER
BACK HERE IN
TIME.



I LOOKED TOWARD THE
STRANGER WHO'D SAVED
MY LIFE. I WAS GOING TO
ASK FOR HIS HELP, AND
THANK HIM FOR WHAT HE'D
DONE. I NEVER EXPECTED
HIM TO BE STEALING
FROM A DEAD MAN.

WHAT
ARE YOU
DOING?



I SAID
WHAT ARE YOU
DOING?!

PUT THAT
BACK!

HE'S
DEAD.

HE DOESN'T
NEED IT, BUT
I DO.

I HAVEN'T
HAD A MEAL IN
TWO DAYS, OR
A HOT BATH
IN FIVE.



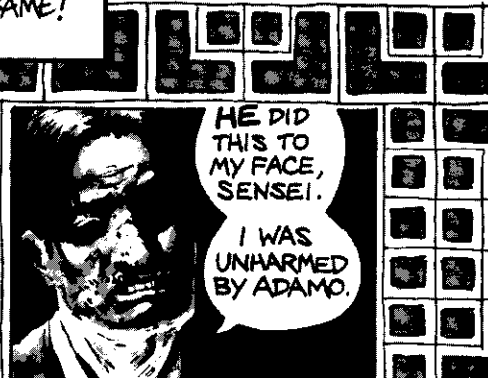
NOW PUT AWAY YOUR GUN
BEFORE I HAVE TO KILL YOU.
THIS IS THE GRATITUDE I GET
FOR SAVING YOUR LIFE?
FAH! YOU DAMNED AGENTS
ARE ALL THE SAME!



THEN WHAT
HAPPENED?

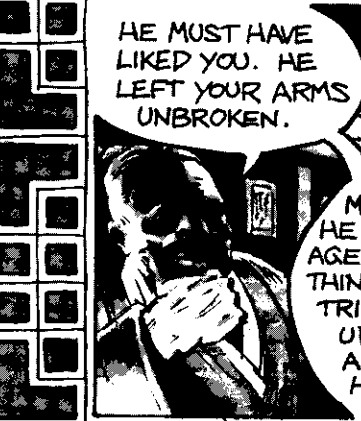


I TRIED TO TAKE THE WALLET
AWAY FROM HIM. I BARELY SAW
HIM MOVE. THE NEXT SOUND I
HEARD WAS THE SOUND OF THE
AMBULANCE ARRIVING. WHEN I
WOKE UP, MY WALLET WAS LYING
ON MY CHEST. ALL MY MONEY
HAD BEEN STOLEN.



HE DID
THIS TO
MY FACE,
SENSEI.

I WAS
UNHARMED
BY ADAMO.



HE MUST HAVE
LIKED YOU. HE
LEFT YOUR ARMS
UNBROKEN.

YOU KNOW THE
MAN I SPEAK OF,
SENSEI?

OH NO. I'VE NEVER
MET HIM, BUT LAST TIME
HE HELPED SOME OF OUR
AGENTS, HE DID THE SAME
THING. ONLY ALL THREE WHO
TRIED TO STOP HIM WOUND
UP WITH CASTS ON BOTH
ARMS. NEXT TIME, LET
HIM HAVE THE MONEY.



YES,
SENSEI.
IF THERE
IS A NEXT
TIME.



THERE
PROBABLY
WILL BE. WE
TEND TO RUN
IN THE SAME
CIRCLES, FOR
BETTER OR
WORSE.

WORLD OF DARKNESS:
DEMON HUNTER

BY JIM MOORE

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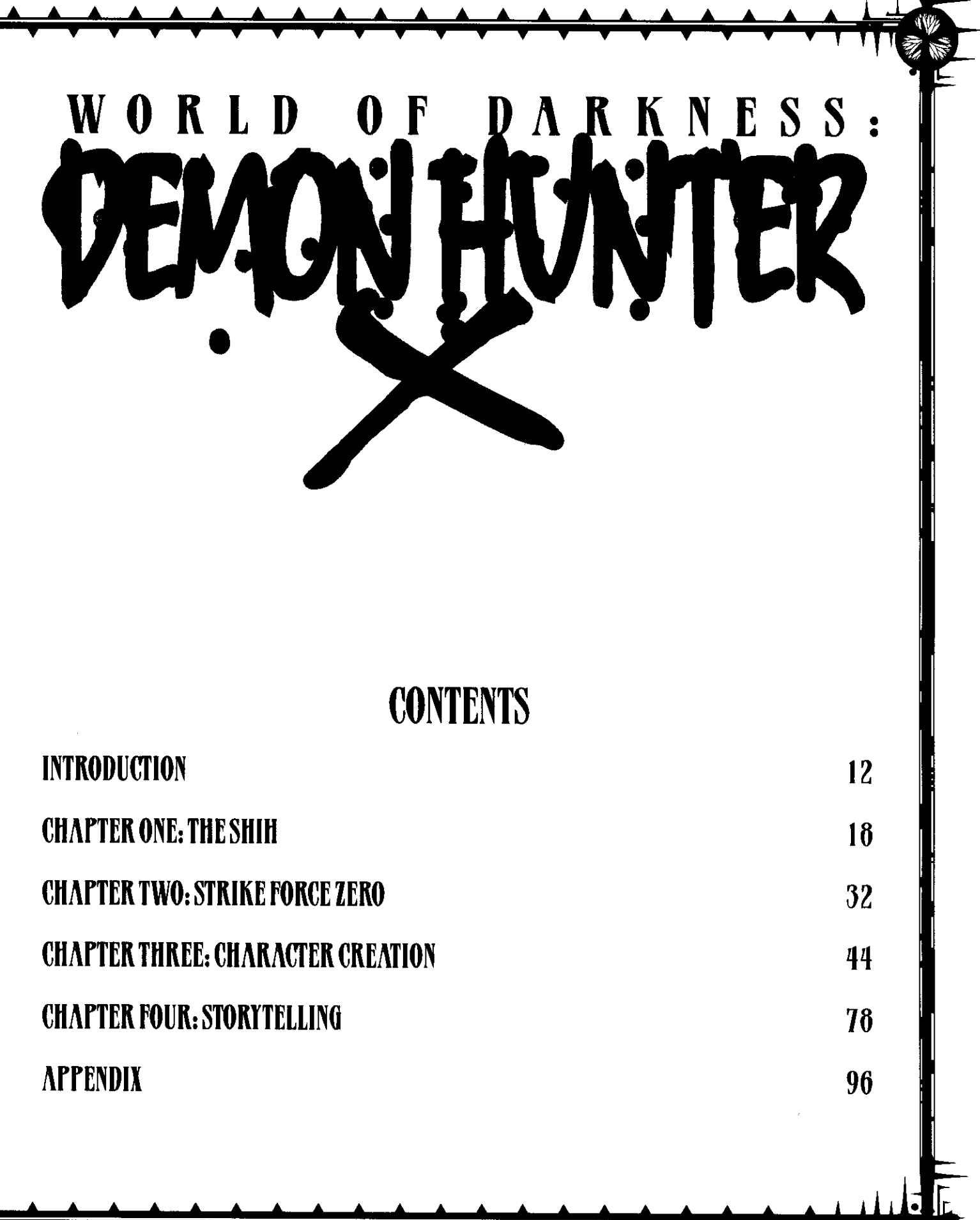
AY, YO

Thus far, the response to *Kindred of the East* has been gratifying, to say the least. In particular, people really seem to love the new Disciplines. Ghost-flame, popping off one's head, soul-flaying...the little things that make unlife worth dying for. And so a few people have asked us, "Hey, how much does it cost to buy new Disciplines for our Kuei-jin, 'cuz it costs 'current level x 8' to advance, but I don't see any listing for buying a new Discipline with experience points."

Well, actually, buying new Disciplines for Kuei-jin costs the standard 10 experience points, just as with *Kindred* Disciplines. New Abilities likewise cost the typical three experience points to purchase. A thousand pardons for neglecting to mention that fact.

Also, while I've got your attention, a moment of silence for Toshiro Mifune, one of Japan's greatest actors and star of *Rashomon*, *The Seven Samurai* and other amazing films. Thanks for a stellar career.

Author's Dedication: The author would like to thank C.B. Cebulski of Central Park Media for his invaluable assistance. Thanks! I owe you about a dozen favors! Also, as always, thanks to my wife, Bonnie, for putting up with my unusual hours.



WORLD OF DARKNESS: **DEMON HUNTER**



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INTRODUCTION

There have always been monsters. From the time when the earliest humans crawled from their caves and looked upon the lightning-split skies, or saw a mountain explode in volcanic fury, fearing that surely their world was at an end, the monsters have been there.

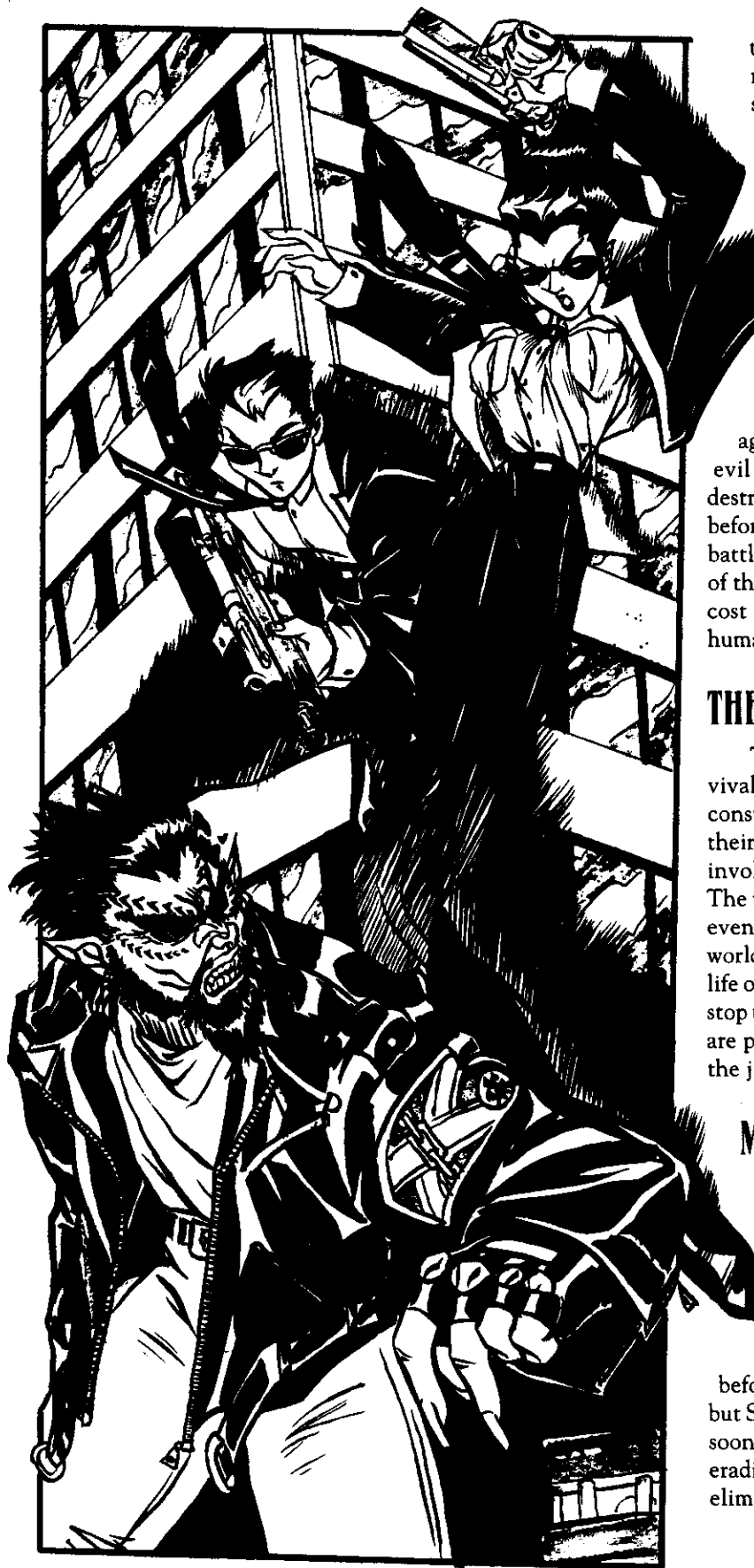
In the West, monsters are perceived as vile, wicked creatures — for any creature that drains the blood of a human child and feeds on its meat must be evil. In the Middle Kingdom, though, the attitudes differ more than a little. Kuei-jin, *gwei*, *hengeyokai*, *daityas*....By whatever name they call themselves, the *shen* are everywhere. Although they are monsters, from the Western perspective, they too have their roles to play in the scheme of things. As surely as the sun generates heat and the air moves when the wind is high, the *shen* exist. Even the most advanced and materialistic minds in the East understand this — and accept it.

This acceptance, though, doesn't come easily or unconditionally. True, most mortals live with the *shen*, accepting them as a part of the natural order, but there are exceptions. For centuries, the Shih have walked the Middle Kingdom, dealing out justice against those *shen* whose malice and arrogance overwhelm the Cycle's dictates. Using weapons, their hands or the special abilities they've developed over lifetimes, these

solitary figures have earned their place among the supernatural forces they fight. Indeed, the Shih have even garnered a modicum of respect, as worthy opponents who actually serve a purpose.

But the world continues to change, and Shih are often archaic in their methods, unable to adapt as readily as the creatures they hunt. Even the timeless Middle Kingdom undergoes evolution, and those who cannot change are doomed to fade away, to be replaced by others who can do the job they can no longer manage. There's a new force on the field of battle, one that doesn't follow the rules of honorable combat; this player uses technology and numbers to balance out its lack of experience or proper training. Strike Force Zero is an upstart, an uninvited guest who keeps the *shen* reeling with one surprise maneuver after another and seldom gives any warning that attack is imminent.

These are the forces who rally against the *shen*: the Shih, who often fight alone and seldom tolerate interference in the proper order of things; and Strike Force Zero — the Japanese government's technologically advanced battle machines who don't care what the proper order is, so long as everyone plays by their rules.



One enforces the natural order, one tries to *reshape* the natural order. Diametrically opposed forces fighting for the same goal: the protection of the human race from the *shen* — the Night People.

Neither cares for the other, though both serve the same purpose. They are the demon hunters, those who defend the rest of us from a World of Darkness. They are the unknown variable in the schemes of the *shen*, the X in the equation.

Together they could possibly perform miracles. Separately, they fight on against a common foe, unable to stop the evil that haunts their world, but satisfied with destroying as many of their enemies as they can before they fall. The demon hunters wage a battle for humankind; one that requires more of them than they like to admit. For some, the cost of victory is nothing less than their own humanity.

THEME

The theme of **Demon Hunter X** is survival. In a world where supernatural forces constantly wage war and often use humans as their pawns, few are willing to take the risks involved to ensure that humans have a choice. The wizards, the vampires, the werewolves and even the ghosts of the dead all seek to rule the world, and they all capriciously snuff out the life of anything that gets in their way. Who will stop them? Only the Shih and Strike Force Zero are prepared for the task — but are they up to the job?

MOOD

The mood of **Demon Hunter X** is one of desperation, anger and growing horror. For all the Shih's efforts, the *shen* keep coming. No matter how many they manage to kill, there are others waiting to take their place, others seeking revenge for the killing of those who went before them. There is no end to the monsters, but Shih are a slow-dying breed and they might soon cease to be. Strike Force Zero exists to eradicate the *shen*, which in their eyes must be eliminated, but its members are only beginning

to understand the sinister truth behind their tasks. The Force seeks desperately to protect humanity from the predators, but these predators can be frighteningly subtle and hide behind the very people the Strike Force seeks to defend. Some members of SF0 aren't even certain if their own families can be trusted, and that is reason enough to be afraid. To the Force, information is knowledge, and knowledge is power, and its members have realized recently how little they know. The very people for whom they work, the people who give them their technological edge, are as mysterious and inscrutable as the demons they battle. Some cynical veterans of the Strike Force wonder exactly what they are fighting for because the creatures they battle seem so much more enlightened as to what is going on.

MORTAL CHARACTERS

There's a certain appeal to the idea of playing a mortal in a world populated by monsters. Most of us love to see the underdog win. For Storytellers and players alike, the idea of fighting overwhelming odds has merit. **Demon Hunter X** is designed as a useful supplement for both Storytellers and players and allows the addition of a new, often unpredictable, element in a world that is almost too well-mapped-out for some people's tastes. As player or Storyteller characters, the Shih and Strike Force Zero offer a new challenge and a new riddle. How much do they know? What are they capable of? These demon hunters are not the fanatical humans at the heart of the Inquisition; they can be reasoned with and even bought for the right price...or can they? Shih warriors of the past are gone, but their legacy lives on in some of the most desperate, dangerous individuals stalking through the Middle Kingdom. Strike Force Zero never seems to run out of new tricks, but its agents sometimes seem completely ignorant of what is going on around them. How is it that the agency manages to accomplish so much when the field agents normally seem as surprised to see the *shen* as the *shen* are to see them? They can't honestly be that blindly lucky, can they? For that matter, where do they get their weapons, which are substantially more powerful than those available to most humans?

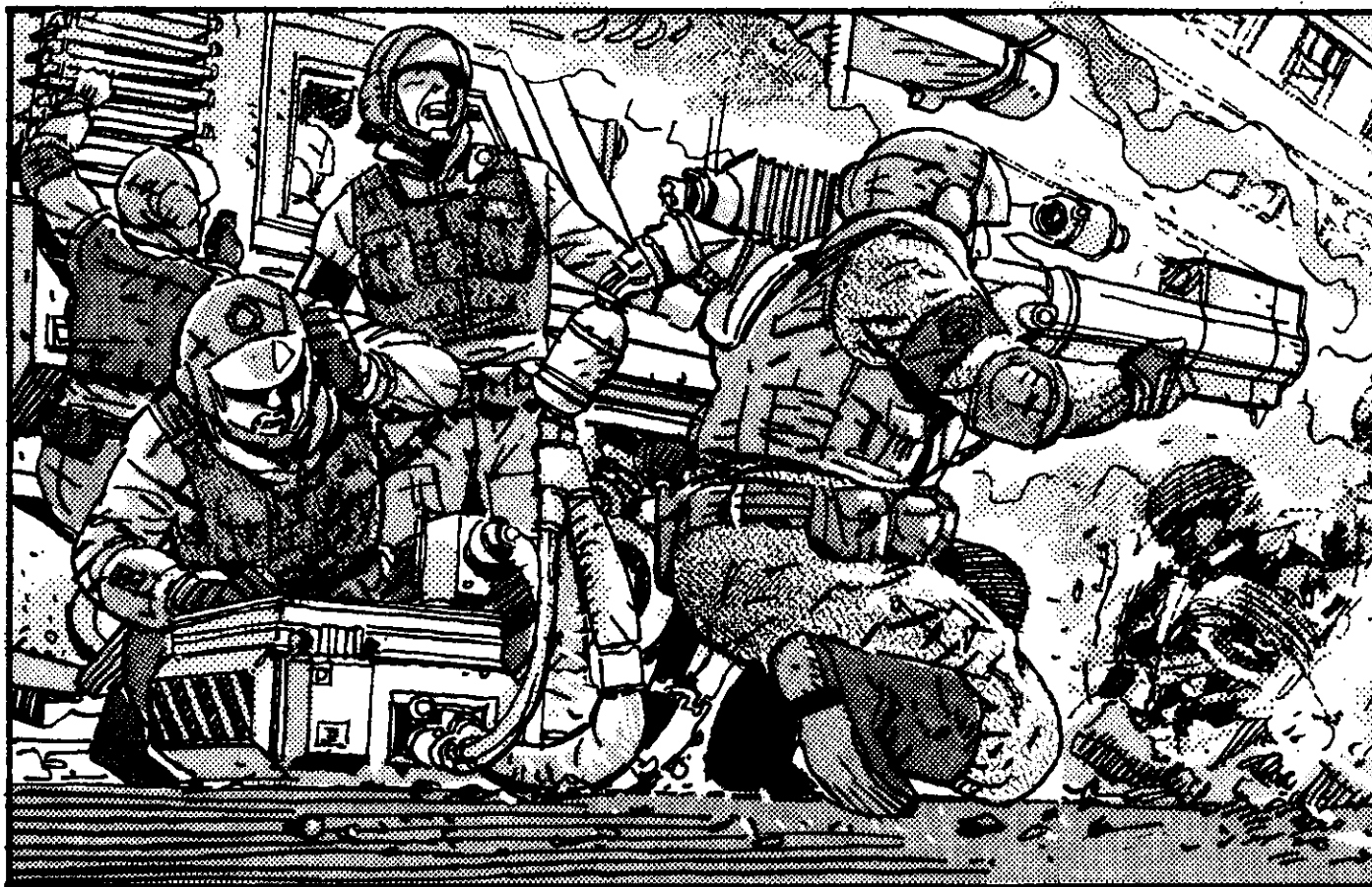


The Middle Kingdom's demon hunters play specific, if sporadic, roles. The prime goal of most Shih normally involves family honor or vengeance, a desire to pay back the demon who set them down the path they now follow. This is followed by a desperate struggle to keep themselves from succumbing to the very evils they've battled for as long as they can remember. Strike Force Zero agents perform their tasks out of patriotism, duty and the desire to rid the world of the half-substantial shadows that haunt it. Both groups do all they can in a battle they fear is already lost, but each seeks to win at almost any cost.

Both the Shih and the Strike Force agents know more than most humans, but sometimes not enough to save them from the creatures they seek to stop. The Shih have legends and stories, passed on from teacher to pupil over the generations, that grant the Shih considerable knowledge of the *shen*, and some of this information is enough to keep them from sleeping soundly. The Shih also know one dreadful fact: They are almost certain to follow in the path of the very creatures they fight if they can't control themselves. Strike Force Zero operatives, by contrast,

stumble through the World of Darkness with heavy artillery and a desire to do the right thing, but they have no solid knowledge of what it is they fight against. What they know is far less than what they think they know, and is enough to guarantee their doom if they are caught with their guard down.

Sometimes the truth is too frightening to face. Demon hunters are, after all, mortals. Even if they survive the *shen*'s attacks, which is doubtful in their chosen professions, they will grow old and die. The best they can hope for is to cause more harm to their foes than those enemies can recover from. Demon hunters' lives are mapped-out from the moment they choose to hunt the *shen*, but the lives of their enemies are not so easily understood. The myths of the past don't quite match up with the realities of the present. Some of the creatures the demon hunters seek to destroy walked with Genghis Khan and helped shape the modern world. No secret is safe, no haven properly protected from the evil of the *shen*. When the creatures of the night decide it's time to start hunting you in return, there is no one left to protect you from their wrath, and it takes only one false move to send them gunning for your very life.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Demon Hunter X is a reference book. For players who want to risk their characters' lives in a battle against the supernatural, this book is a necessity. Whether playing Shih or members of Strike Force Zero, the background presented is necessary, along with the details of character creation. However, the player is encouraged to remember that the characters *don't know squat* about the World of Darkness. Everything the players know is effectively useless.

For Storytellers, this sourcebook is highly recommended. Read every page, then shape the information to fit your world. This book presents no hidden temple where the Shih train formally in the art of demon hunting, but if you want one in your world, make the change. Strike Force Zero doesn't have an array of gigantic robot battle suits with which to crush their enemies, but if such things better suit your needs, don't hesitate to throw them in. Storytellers are, as always, encouraged to make what is presented here a spring-

board for their own plans and schemes. Most of all, this book is a tool to make your chronicle more interesting. Use what you want, disregard the rest.

This book contains several chapters:

- **Chapter One: The Shih** details the millennia-old ways of the mendicant Shih hunters.
- **Chapter Two: Strike Force Zero** tells of this super-secret, super-high-tech branch of the Japanese government — how it picks its agents and how it uses them.
- **Chapter Three: Character Creation** discusses the difference between demon hunters and normal mortals. It gives rules for creating both Shih and Strike Force Zero agents as well.
- **Chapter Four: Storytelling** discusses evoking the unique ambience of a demon hunter chronicle, and it provides some of the hidden “back story” behind the hunters’ (not-so?) illustrious traditions.
- Finally, the **Appendix** lists influential demon hunters, characters and weaponry.





CHAPTER ONE:

THE SHIH

They walk alone in darkness, combating the forces of the Thousand Hells with nothing but the power of their hands and their will. Over 3,000 years ago, Shih first stepped forward to do battle with the *shen*. Though the proud houses of the Shih are no more, their traditions live on and the telling of their beginnings is one of their most revered tales.

By the later years of the Shang Dynasty, China had reached the point where the first real kingdoms came into focus. The emperor and the shamans were consolidating their power rapidly. They and those loyal to them feared little. They had supernatural help in their quests for power, and they gladly offered human sacrifices in exchange for that aid. While no great cities yet existed, small areas of civilization steadily grew stronger and the people regularly offered up bloody tribute to the spirits in the dark.

For the ruling class, all seemed well. Many of the priests and shamans either worked for, or actually were, Kuei-jin. Few dared oppose them, and those who tried often became the next sacrifice demanded by the "gods." The Kuei-jin's manipulations hid the secret of their existence, for they had enemies even then: other *shen* who sought to see them crushed.

A man of wealth and power was born into one of the early noble houses. His name was Wan Kung Yi, and his was the hand that eventually created the Shih armies.

Yi was born into prosperity and was expected, as were all the males in his family, to learn the ways of war, despite having the heart of a dreamer. Yi kept his own counsel in most respects, speaking only when he was asked, and then hesitantly. What few people understood was that Yi wasn't shy, he was busy absorbing every sight and sound and drinking in knowledge of the world around him.

While Yi was a worthy warrior, his father felt he lacked what was necessary to make him a great leader. So he sent his son out to gather taxes from the people of the province and report what he saw. Yi's father understood his son's ways better than most, and he knew the boy would study every detail that passed within his gaze. In this way, Yi was given a worthy assignment, while his father learned more than he could have from a dozen other observers.

What he didn't count on was just how much his son would see. While Yi's father was a good man, he too was influenced by the Kuei-jin. Failure to observe the order of the hidden masters would have meant the destruction of the family, and that he could not allow. Prosperity was his so long as he continued to do their bidding, and the boy's father loved his family too much to see them hurt.

As time passed, Yi saw the *shen* working their subtle magics. He saw the villages that lived in fear of werewolves; he observed the places haunted by the dead. Yi witnessed the



bodies of those killed by the Kuei-jin when they hungered and the haughty indifference of the soldiers who worked for his father.

Yi reported these sights to his father and asked permission to gather an army of soldiers to do battle. His request was refused and, in the privacy of his father's chambers, he learned the shameful secret of his family and the nobles throughout the dynasty. Unable to believe that his father not only knew of these happenings but condoned them, the normally quiet Yi raised his voice in anger and called his father a coward. Yi's father could not permit the words to go unpunished, despite his love for his son.

Yi was exiled from his home and granted only a small wagon, his armor and weapons. Angry, humiliated and wounded by his father's deeds, Yi did what many do in times of crisis: He sought guidance from greater forces.

Yi wandered the land for five years and learned more about the creatures who dwelt among the humans and who fed on them as if they were mere cattle. He learned to ride a horse, like the Chou barbarians to the west of his home, and Yi lived among the barbarians rather than face his own people. He battled with the *shen* on a few occasions, but he managed only to wound them before escaping with his life.

Then, Yi came upon a temple beset by *shen*. The temple was not like many Yi had seen; his eyes, which saw with hawk's sight, observed none of the telltale signs he'd come to associate with demons. The attacking *shen* — hideous spider-creatures — sought to drink the blood of the people within the temple and had nearly broken down the barriers the sages had built. Yi was tired, weary of travel and almost empty in spirit, but he decided to do what he could to help the sages, as he believed that his time to die had finally come — and he knew that he could do some good before he fell.

Yi drew his sword and uttered a battle cry as he rode his horse into battle against the *shen*. Yi prepared himself for death, convinced that he could atone for his family's sins in some small way by sacrificing himself. And as he stormed toward his enemies, the gods touched him. Time seemed to flow differently for Yi, and what had seemed an impossible task suddenly became much easier than he'd ever dreamed possible. Still, the battle was wretched and bloody. The *shen* attacked him again and again and he returned the favor with nearly inhuman ferocity. But when it was done, the demons were dead and Yi still barely lived.

Yi collapsed in exhaustion and would have died if not for the sages. They cared for him, mended his body and healed his spirit.

They discussed their way of life with their savior, and he told of his past in turn. In the course of their teachings, Yi came to understand that what his father did was right: He had saved his people from the demons by bargaining with them. The *shen* were, as Yi soon learned, as much a part of the natural order as the storms that sometimes destroyed cities, or the droughts that dried the southern rivers and left farmers with no rice for a season.

Having learned this truth, Yi contemplated the matter for a full year, during which time he also studied the ways of the monks. He then approached the eldest and wisest of the monks and asked a simple question: "If the *shen* are as unstoppable as a storm, or the hot winds that dry the Earth, how was I able to defeat them when they attacked this temple?"

"How does the sun know when to set?" replied the old man. "Some things just are. You are a man of virtue and your cause was just. Perhaps this was the reason for your survival. To every Yin there is a Yang, just as there is spring to compensate for the autumn."

"I am only one man, and there are many *shen*." Yi looked at the old man and waited for his sage advice.

The monk said, "Then you must find other men of virtue to aid you if you seek to bring down the *shen*."

Yi smiled then, and his face felt strange, for he hadn't smiled in many years. "Are you and your brethren not men of virtue?" he asked.

The monk had no reply for the first time since they'd met; he stayed silent for a long time, but Yi waited patiently, for he understood that what he asked was not an easy question. The old man finally assented, and the monks beneath him followed his lead. Though many months of training lay ahead, the Shih had made their decision.

The Shih grew in number and in power through the course of the next decade. As they fought their enemies, they contemplated what they had learned in each battle and practiced how best to defend against similar attacks. They discovered how to focus their own will as a weapon and resist many of the demons' foul tricks through meditation and prayer. Though many fell in battle, the survivors of the demon attacks replaced the fallen just as quickly. Those who'd lost loved ones to the demons asked if they could battle the monsters who had destroyed their ambitions and families, and the best of these would-be avengers were accepted within the ranks of the Shih. As the numbers within the Shih grew, several other temples rose to accommodate them.

The newest members first learned the ways of the monks by developing patience and discipline. Their bodies were toughened through practice and used to build the new temples, while their minds were sharpened with riddles and their senses were trained to see past the trickery of the *shen*.



In his travels, Yi met a woman, Heng-O, who was related to the water-spirits of the rivers. Together they spoke of many things and, through her, he realized that not all of the *shen* were evil. As he learned his lesson on how to tell the benevolent *shen* from the malevolent destroyers, Yi asked Heng-O's father for her hand in marriage. He consented. Heng-O bore Yi three sons and two daughters, all of whom followed in their father's footsteps and became Shih.

At this time, Heaven began to frown on Shang. The leaders of the Chou, among whom Yi had dwelt, soon began to see the wisdom of destroying the corrupting *shen*. Though many Chou rulers were corrupt, many more offered assistance to the great warrior Yi and his powerful shamans.

In time, the Shih's unceasing study of their enemies bore fruit because they learned the weaknesses of their foes. They came to comprehend that silver hurt certain types of *shen*, while various colors of jade often worked as defenses against the demons that preyed on the humans. Shih taught their findings to others within their ranks and even inscribed warnings on bones and tortoise shells. They left these warnings in areas where *shen* held obvious sway. Few could read the crudely written notices, but Yi insisted on posting them anyway.

The *shen* responded by seeking out the Shih and trying to destroy them. What the *shen* were not prepared for was the silence that met their queries. The nobles knew nothing of these warriors, and the peasants who benefited from the monks' actions were often too grateful to reveal what they knew.

All that was known to the *shen* was that certain holy men were involved in the hunts. The *shen*, using their influence with the nobility, sent armies of warriors throughout the land to slaughter shamans whose faith drew them apart from the corrupt shamans of Shang. In many places throughout the dynasty, the soldiers of Shang were little more than bullies to begin with. Anyone without a weapon was open prey to a soldier, doubly so now, because even those with weapons were made targets by the law.

Many humans died in the bloody war with the *shen*, but even this heinous slaughter was secondary to the Kuei-jin, who had grown bloated in their power and their arrogance.

Oddly enough, Yi's greatest accomplishment came about almost by accident. What started as a quest to free his father from the clutches of the *shen* turned into a battle and then a war that changed the face of China and withered the power of the Kuei-jin for centuries to come.

Others in the Middle Kingdom grew dissatisfied with Shang. In the lands where Yi lived, the Chou gathered their own forces, thus preparing to overthrow their enemies of Shang. When Yi remained calm, even in his actions to destroy the *shen*, the Chou became angrier as they were forced to follow laws created by a man most had never met. Political pressures built up to the point where war was inevitable. The heat of the Chou's passions were only made greater by the spreading word that the *shen* held the emperor as their servant.

Yi never stopped thinking about his family and the father he'd insulted and disgraced throughout this time of growth and change for the Shih. Though years had passed since Yi had left his family, he decided that the time had come to return to his home in the heart of Shang. Yi, dressed in simple clothes and carrying a staff and meager food supplies, left the temple that he and his followers built, and he began the long trip back to the province he'd been exiled from. Yi took 50 members of the Shih with him; they served as his entourage and his protectors. He always walked alone, though he walked with many others, for to do otherwise would bring attention to himself. Yi's disciples followed his lead, walking in small groups or by themselves. From time to time, they asked Yi questions and he always answered them.

Yi encountered many demons throughout the long journey. He sometimes heard them and saw them himself. But of all the ones he met, Yi destroyed only seven. When asked why he spared the others, Yi replied: "They are following their nature and have not done too much harm. As long as they do what they must to survive, I have no reason to punish them, any more than I have to punish a rain cloud. But when the *shen* I encounter are gluttons, or seek to kill for the joy of killing, I must stop them." Those demons that Yi left alone were unmolested by his followers, though many were tempted to test themselves in battle.

Still, despite Yi's leniency, the tales of his battles against the demons grew to legendary levels. In distant parts of the Middle Kingdom, a few others began hunting *shen* in Yi's name, as they were taught by his disciples who had spread far and wide across the lands. Several, like Yi himself, were wizards. Yi never truly understood that he was a sorcerer, and those who worked with him never suspected he was anything other than a man touched by the heavens.

Yi observed the growing discontent of the Chou while he traveled, and he realized that war was soon coming to the land. He stopped at the houses of nobles and spoke with them about their plans; he passed the word from one family to the next and worked to consolidate the Chou. For what few knew was that Yi planned to rid his family of the *shen* who forced their rule over his father and kin. Despite his silence in these matters, his discussions with the various Chou rulers and with his growing army of followers made it clear to most that Yi was preparing for a struggle of some sort.

The Kuei-jin of Shang noticed the changes taking place among the Chou barbarians, and they decided the time for action was near. What they failed to understand, however, was that mortals alone orchestrated the actions taking place in the southern regions. Though their spies couldn't designate who was responsible for the forces massing against them, they felt it must be a threat led by the *shen* to the south.

Several factions of the *shen* — and there are many, as any Shih can tell you — worried over this threat and finally set a meeting in the mountains near Kun Lun. The Yama Kings set aside their differences with the greatest leaders of the Shang Kuei-jin, and together they worked to bring an end to Yi and his followers. The Kuei-jin had a plan to place

themselves in the minds of all mortals as true gods, and the Yama Kings were only too willing to help them in exchange for peace between themselves and their long-time enemies.

While the Yama Kings and the Kuei-jin made their bargains, Yi reached his home and found that nothing was as it should have been. His father's palace was burned to the ground. His father and his brothers were dead, and the women of his family were gone. It took no time for Yi to discover that his father had rebelled against the Kuei-jin and that the *shen* had retaliated. Every male in his family had been slaughtered, every female and child sacrificed.

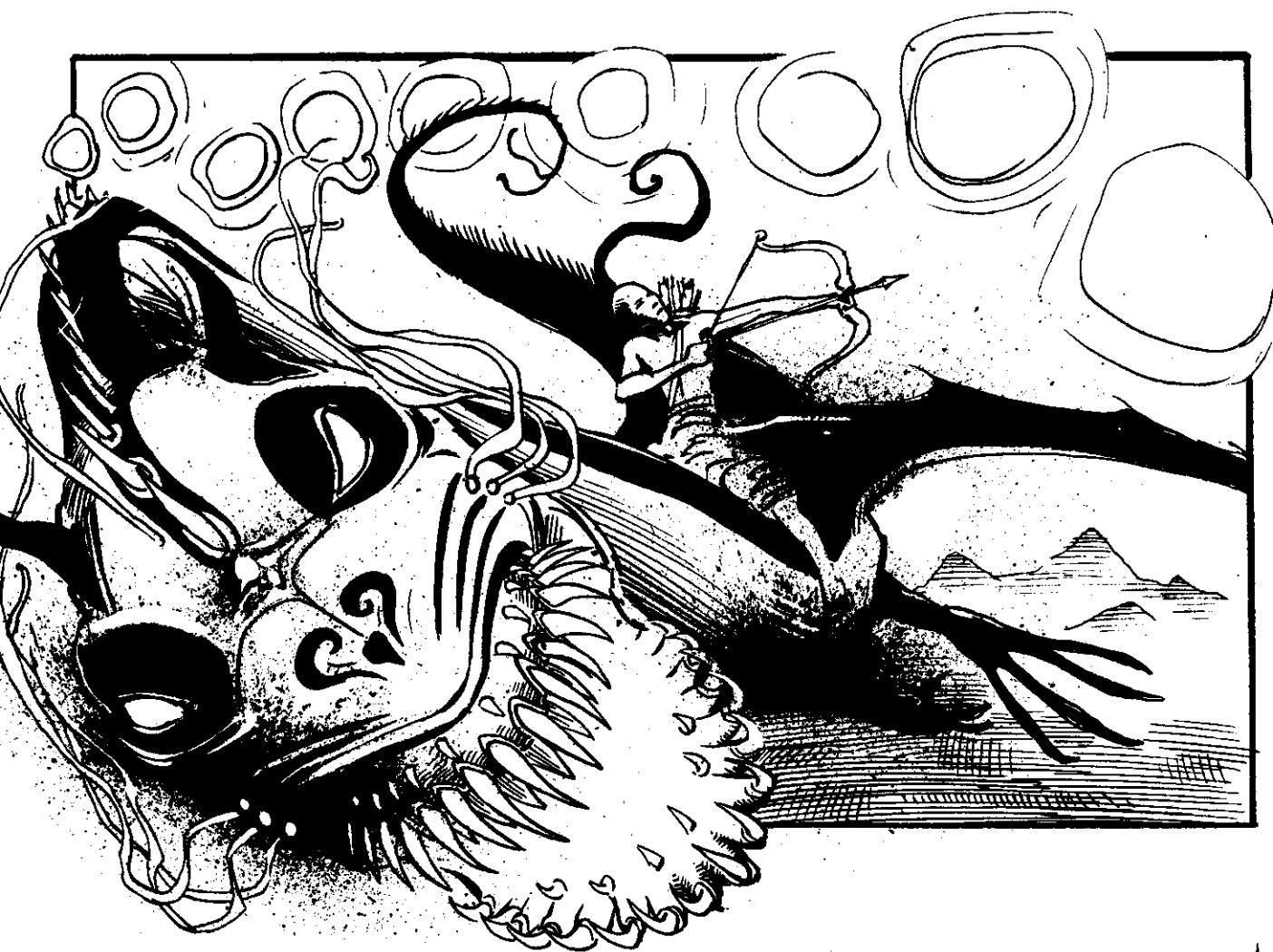
The legends are vague as to exactly what Yi did when he discovered the destruction of his people. But all agree that madness gripped him. From the *kamui* to the *hengeyokai*, no *shen* was left in peace. Yi caught the attention of the one beast that never feared anything as simple as a wizard or a mortal — he gained the notice of a dragon.

The dragon, none other than the great Kung Kung, who once knocked loose the Pillars of Heaven and flooded the world, spoke for many hours with Yi, while his followers cowered in fear. Yi then left with the great dragon, as he was held in one massive paw and lifted into the heavens.

The Cathayans and the demon lords spoke, even as the mortal armies of the Chou gathered to make war on the northern emperor. The Shang Kuei-jin offered a great sacrifice to the Yama Kings, murdering thousands of victims in their honor. And with this offering, they were granted the power to perform a powerful magic: In the skies over the Middle Kingdom, the light of the sun shattered and then grew more brilliant than ever before. Where one sun had been, 10 now filled the skies. The brilliance was beyond imagining, and though all of China saw the 10 suns burning in the heavens, only the lands of the Chou suffered from their heat.

The Chou, enraged by the attack, rose up to attack their neighbors. The slaves of Shang, seeing the 10 suns as an omen, joined the Chou in this great rebellion. The *shen* and mortals in Chou greatly suffered, often blistering and dying from the tremendous heat. But neither group gave way willingly — even as mortal attacked mortal, *shen* attacked *shen*. And through it all, the Yama Kings and the Kuei-jin reveled in their power.

Three months after the war began, it ended with one final assault. The Chou and the Shang fought in large numbers never imagined before then, and the *shen* warred

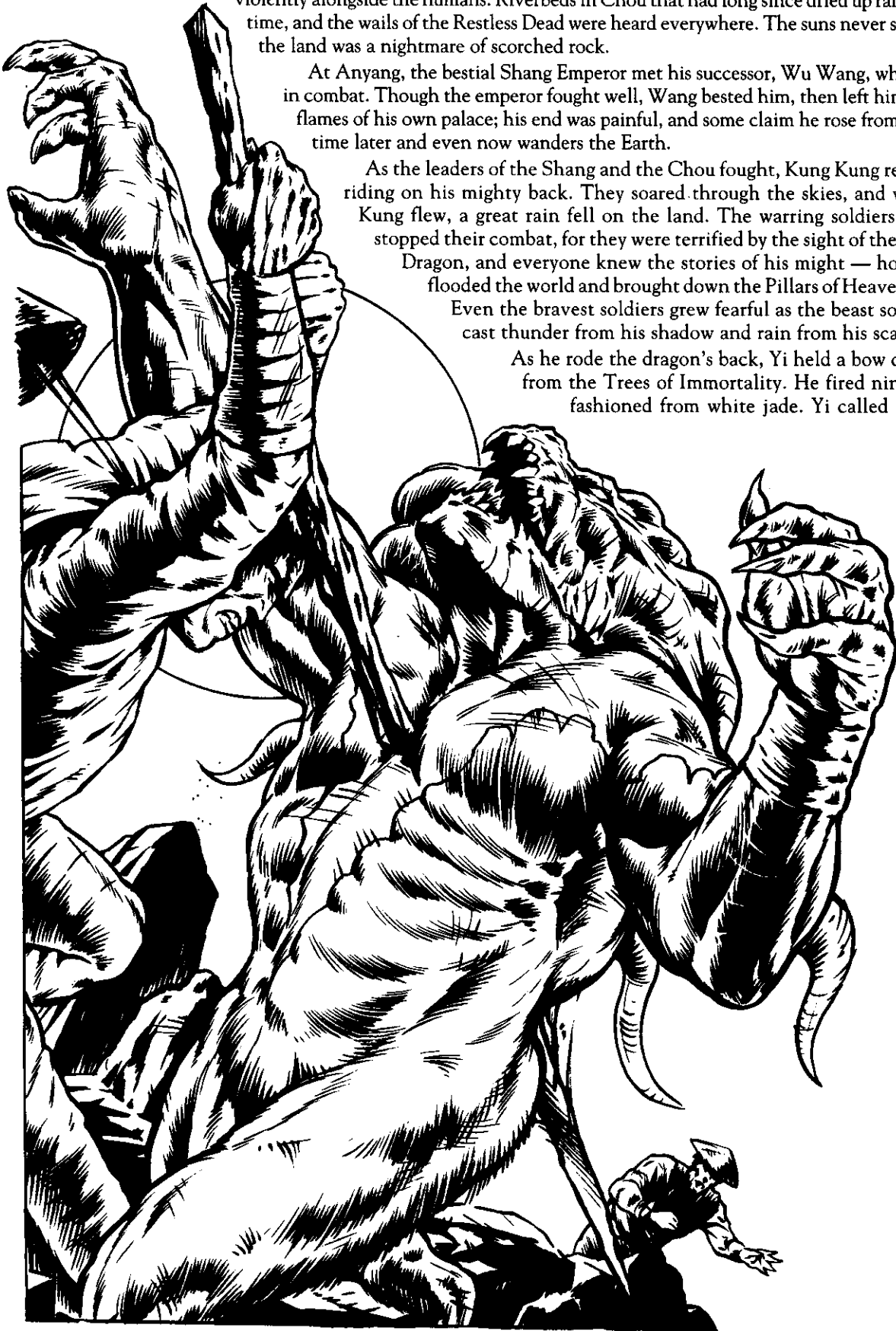


violently alongside the humans. Riverbeds in Chou that had long since dried up ran red during this time, and the wails of the Restless Dead were heard everywhere. The suns never set in Chou, and the land was a nightmare of scorched rock.

At Anyang, the bestial Shang Emperor met his successor, Wu Wang, who led the Chou in combat. Though the emperor fought well, Wang bested him, then left him to burn in the flames of his own palace; his end was painful, and some claim he rose from his grave some time later and even now wanders the Earth.

As the leaders of the Shang and the Chou fought, Kung Kung returned with Yi riding on his mighty back. They soared through the skies, and wherever Kung Kung flew, a great rain fell on the land. The warring soldiers beneath them stopped their combat, for they were terrified by the sight of the great Celestial Dragon, and everyone knew the stories of his might — how he had once flooded the world and brought down the Pillars of Heaven with his rage. Even the bravest soldiers grew fearful as the beast soared down and cast thunder from his shadow and rain from his scales.

As he rode the dragon's back, Yi held a bow crafted of wood from the Trees of Immortality. He fired nine arrows, each fashioned from white jade. Yi called a curse for the



Yama Kings and the Kuei-jin as he shot each arrow; every one flew straight and true, striking one of the 10 suns in the heavens. As each sun was struck, it flared brightly and then disappeared — and as each was struck, the Yama Kings and the Kuei-jin suffered a curse.

Every curse Yi cast had its effect on the target of his anger. But the cost for him was high as well, for each curse cost Yi a part of his spirit and his Chi. Yi and Kung Kung landed when the ninth sun faded from the sky, leaving only the original sun burning in the heavens.

As the storms Kung Kung created raged across the continent, Yi climbed down from the great dragon's back and the beast flew away; it has never been seen by mortal eyes again.

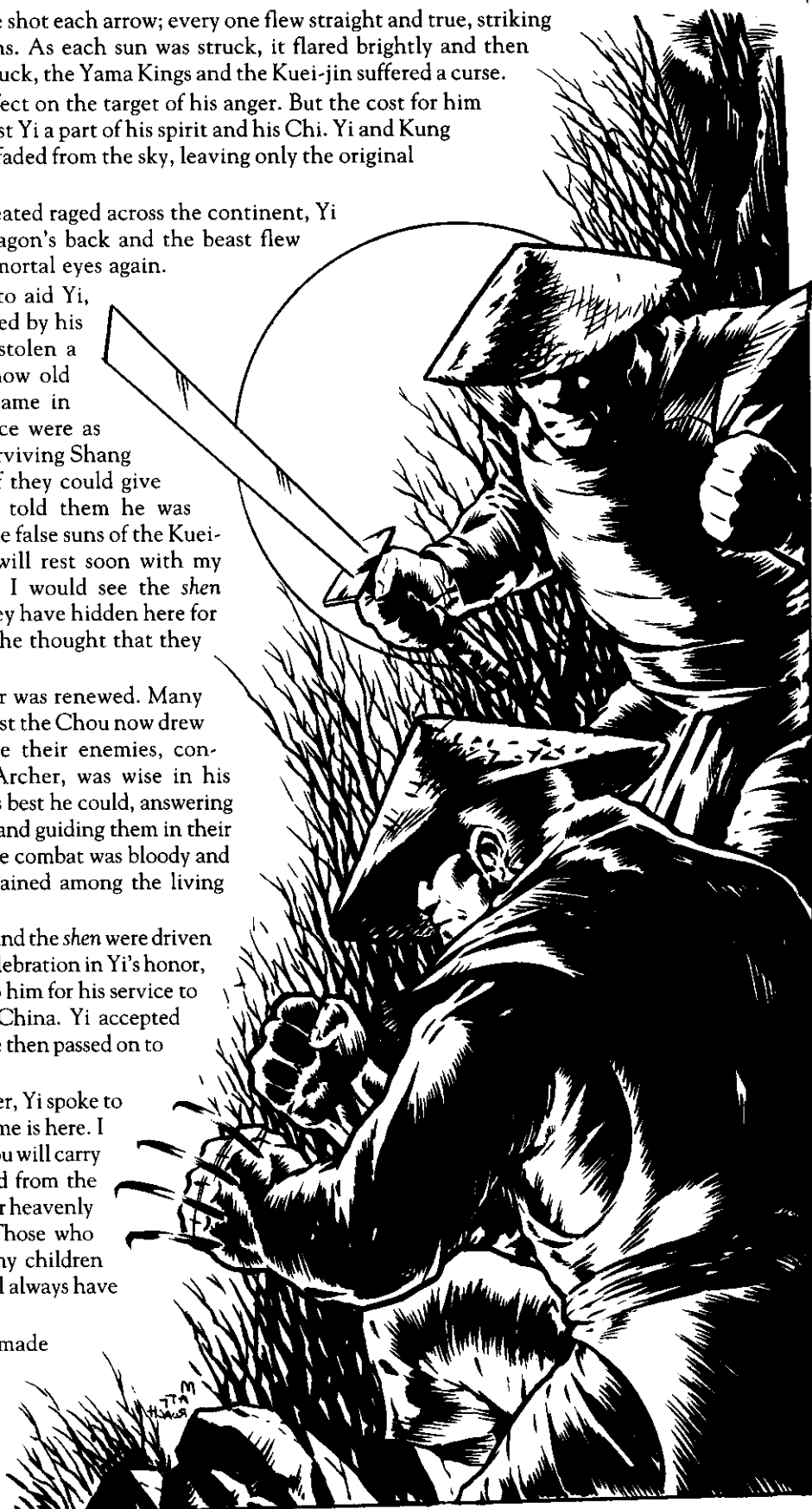
Many people came forward to aid Yi, for all could see that he was pained by his great sacrifice. Each arrow had stolen a decade of his life, and he was now old beyond imagining. His breath came in gasps and the wrinkles in his face were as deep as cuts. Even some of the surviving Shang soldiers stepped forward to see if they could give the man comfort, but he soon told them he was beyond help. "I have destroyed the false suns of the Kuei-jin, but I am tired now, and I will rest soon with my ancestors. Before that happens, I would see the *shen* driven from my homeland, for they have hidden here for many years, and I cannot stand the thought that they hide here any longer."

And with Yi's words, the war was renewed. Many of the soldiers who'd fought against the Chou now drew their weapons to fight alongside their enemies, convinced that Yi, the Excellent Archer, was wise in his commands. The sorcerer rested as best he could, answering the questions of the Chou leaders and guiding them in their battle against the *shen*. Though the combat was bloody and many died on both sides, Yi remained among the living throughout the time of war.

The war was won eventually, and the *shen* were driven from the land. There was a great celebration in Yi's honor, and many treasures were offered to him for his service to Wu Wang, the new Emperor of China. Yi accepted several of these treasures, which he then passed on to his five children.

When the celebration was over, Yi spoke to his followers one last time. "My time is here. I leave the world now that I know you will carry on my duties to protect the world from the marauding spirits who neglect their heavenly duties and prey on the people. Those who would follow me should follow my children and learn from them, for they shall always have my guidance."

Many came forward and made vows to follow Yi's children; these vows were given with a sacrificial offering of blood, and when all had made their promise, the ground around Yi was red





and wet. He cast his last great magic and used the blood of the Shih as a tool. Though he had caused the Kuei-jin to suffer for their arrogance, Yi felt they needed one final punishment. He used the last of his great energies by placing a curse on all the Kuei-jin — a curse that assured that they never utilized the heavens as their weapon against humanity again. No longer could the Kuei-jin bear the light of the sun. Smiling, Yi died shortly after the curse was put upon his enemies.

The Shih were an army in their own right for 200 glorious years. They moved through the Middle Kingdom and struck down the *shen* who dared break from the heavens and strike against mortals. As they moved over the land, some settled and built additional monasteries, while others died in combat.

THE GATHERING DARKNESS

During the next 200 years, Shih grew in strength and endurance, building fortresses and schools for the teaching of their ways. Some Shih continued their humble ways, but many of their number chose to follow a grander path: Calling themselves the "Celestial Army," these demon hunters sought to destroy the *shen* wherever they dwelled, even when there was no need for them to act. Many Shih denounced this Celestial Army, for they were appalled by this breach of one of Yi's principal commands. Yi had stated that only those *shen* who failed to fulfill their heavenly duties should be struck down.

Though the Celestial Army became great, very few true Shih remained when it reached its pinnacle. The demon hunters left, and those who remained were mere soldiers who felt they understood the art of demon hunting. That these soldiers fought in greater numbers and sought to kill all *shen* was evidence of their arrogance and weakness.

The Army gained in temporal power and recognition during the early part of the Chou Dynasty. It made demands of the Chou Emperor; it even requested a portion of the imperial taxes. The wisest Shih continued to wander as they always had, looking for the demons that broke from the heavens and dealing out justice.

The Celestial Army's greatest school was built in the Kun Lun Mountains. The edifice was a majestic fortress with gilded walls and opulent furnishings. Many of the writings captured from the fleeing Kuei-jin were kept within its walls, but they were viewed more as trophies than as sources of wisdom.

The true Shih, on the other hand, examined the Kuei-jin's writings carefully, to the point where the most scholarly learned the forbidden language of the Kuei-jin: *kaja*. Even a newly risen vampire was a deadly threat, but since Yi had destroyed most of them in his last epic battle, so the foolish and arrogant believed, many of the Celestial Army ignored the lessons they could have learned.

As the Army did its best to become an important part of the Chou Dynasty's government, the Shih continued the work they'd begun before the dynasty's rise: They studied the ways of demons and practiced the best methods for fighting them. Because there were times when weapons were hard to find or simply inappropriate, Shih studied how best to fight unarmed, thus exercising their bodies to toughen them for combat. Ironically, their best source of learning came from the writings of the Kuei-jin, which they had gathered together during the war against Shang.

Some say the final separation of the Celestial Army and the Shih was merely a matter of luck; Shih believe it was divine intervention. Those who commanded the Celestial Army decided they could no longer tolerate the stony silence of the ones who refused their rightful name, so they gave them a choice: Join with us fully, or leave.

The Shih who still tolerated the Army's arrogance left and took their own teachings with them, but they left behind most of the works of the Kuei-jin.

One month after the last of the Shih left the palace of the Celestial Army, the mountains of Kun Lun were leveled — destroyed in a monumental explosion that eradicated all traces of their glory from the Earth. Though no evidence exists as to what caused the devastation, most Shih maintain it was the Kuei-jin and the Yama Kings working together a second time.

The Shih survived, as they were not present for the great destruction, but the works of the Cathayan philosophers and historians were destroyed. The Army burned brightly and faded quickly; no mortal history speaks of it. The Shih walked forward and continued their quest for balance between the *shen* and the humans.

THE WANDERERS

Shih learned well from the Celestial Army's folly. They never again settled in one area, and the few monasteries they still controlled were abandoned as soon as word of the tragedy spread. The eldest and wisest Shih taught their disciples as best they could, and then they went their own way and instructed their students to find worthy candidates to replace them. Despite the fact that one of the first disciplines any Shih masters is the ability to face the *shen*, it seemed that many of the masters were ancient before their time, and thus were afraid of facing the *shen* any longer.

From the time of the Army's fall to the present, little has changed about the Shih's methods of operation. Political tides mean nothing to Shih — so long as the policies are being set by humans — for, ironically, the people the Shih have sworn to protect are also the people in whom Shih have the least interest.

The Shih have diversified and spread throughout the Middle Kingdom over the centuries, and they've adapted the philosophies they were taught to make sense in the areas where they dwell. Some follow Buddhist doctrines, others study Shinto, and still others follow Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity. But none of these beliefs is their primary source of faith. All Shih understand that what they practice on a personal level has little to do with the truth they follow as demon hunters.

THE SHIH IN THE MODERN WORLD

Before Enlightenment
carrying water and chopping wood.

After Enlightenment
carrying water and chopping wood.

— Traditional Zen saying

Shih no longer organize themselves on any large scale. While meetings do take place, they are sporadic at best and almost always accidental or coincidental. Shih believe that when such encounters occur, it is because Heaven has joined them to fight a foe too strong for any of them to face alone. Perhaps they are right. Certainly, when the Shih do gather in numbers greater than two or three, the local *shen* begin to worry.

Shih traditions are no longer taught in monasteries or schools. They are taught by one teacher to one or two disciples. Most Shih remember their own teachings very clearly, as they were shoved into their heads over the course of 15 or more years. For that reason, there has been little evolution of the philosophies taught by Yi so many centuries ago. Few among the Shih even consider breaking from the ways in which they themselves were instructed.

A few families do remain as units of Shih hunters, but they are very rare. Most trace their roots back to Yi himself, though whether or not their genealogies are accurate is a source of great potential debate.

Of late, a new trend has started among the younger Shih. Small groups of demon hunters have casually begun to band together — for mutual assistance, or possibly for companionship. Older, more experienced Shih frown on this behavior; nonetheless, these gatherings of Shih are becoming more commonplace in the large cities where the Kuei-jin are strongest.



ON BECOMING A SHIH DEMON HUNTER

How extreme is the poison of vengeance among men!

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Just how far are you willing to go for revenge? To become a Shih, the answer has to be “to the five directions and beyond.” The would-be disciple must give up everything. Only a very small handful, even those who think they’re willing to sacrifice everything for revenge, manage to make the grade.

The Shih don’t work nine-to-five jobs. They aren’t given paychecks for what they do, and many resort to theft to make a living. More often than not, the money they steal comes from the victims of the *shen*, or from the monsters themselves should they be carrying wallets. The Shih don’t deal with people well because most of the human race hasn’t the vaguest clue what they’ve been through, or what they’re still going through. When it comes to manners, most Shih haven’t the time or the patience to learn them, or to use them.

Shih primarily choose their disciples from surviving victims of the *shen*. Those who’ve been attacked by *shen* and lived through the experience are rare, but those who have lost loved ones to the *shen* are not quite so unusual a phenomenon.

Vampires, werecreatures, and other demons take a toll on human life, just as humans deplete the ocean’s population when they’re looking for seafood. In many cases, the creatures of the night fail — or refuse — to think about the ramifications of their actions on their victim’s families. “They’ll mourn, and they’ll get on with their lives” seems to be the general outlook. For some people, though, it just isn’t that easy. Some take their loved ones’ deaths intensely personal, and some vow revenge. That’s where the Shih come onto the scene.

Shih don’t seek recruits actively; they merely offer to aid in vengeance when they hear of such vows. Despite the modernization of some parts of the Middle Kingdom, a vow of revenge is very serious business, especially a vow made on the graves of dead family.

No one who joins the Shih is permitted to keep his or her delusions for long. The Shih explain what’s involved in demon hunting, and the possible price, to every would-be applicant. Most importantly, they explain that the training is long and painful. If the person is still interested, the training begins almost immediately.

Some Shih, though, aren’t really given an option. Children orphaned by the *shen* are the Celestial Army’s most common recruits. Those with family are taken to them and handed over, but children with no aunts, uncles or grandparents to take them in usually end up starting their education as demon hunters when the worst of their grieving is done.

TRAINING

That which is hard to do, can it be lightly spoken?

— Confucius, *Analects*

Shih methods of training have changed very little over the centuries. The mind of a Shih must be properly molded in order to resist the temptations and terrors of the *shen* and, therefore, it is the first area where training begins.

Cruelty and honesty are the tools of the trade. Shih masters are renowned for their wisdom regarding demon hunting and are almost as well-known for their ability to scold foolish disciples. The first lesson of every Shih is how to withstand the mind-tricks of the *shen*. After all, some demons cause an unspeakable panic the moment they are seen. Shih teach their disciples to withstand this panic by hardening their resolve. Meditation, exercise and constant reminders that the creatures they face are still killable are the main components in breaking that natural fear — even though the task is harder to accomplish than most mortals could ever imagine.

The other important method is exposure to the source of that fear. The Shih take their apprentices with them when they hunt demons, though they make certain the student is either a safe distance away or well-armed. The purpose of bringing their students with them is twofold: First is the chance for the student to acquaint himself with the types of *shen* he will encounter. The second reason is to see if the student is capable of placing self-control over the need for vengeance. It’s common for the apprentice demon hunter to attack the first *shen* seen after a loved one’s death, and Shih don’t take that irrational hatred for granted. If necessary, the teacher stops the student from being suicidally foolish.

The next step in the mental training of the Shih is learning how to focus their anger and resentment into a weapon against their enemies. Shih understand that the *shen* use the life-force, or Chi, of their victims as a source of power in many cases. That isn’t an option for the Shih. Instead, they learn how to use their own Chi in the fight against the *shen* and how to protect their life-force from the demons’ greedy clutches.

Using meditation as a means to focus the will and the body has long been a practice for the Shih, who know how to control breathing and force the body’s metabolism to respond to unusual circumstances. Buried alive for 48 hours without air? The Shih have done that and more. That ability to focus Chi permits them to fight with almost superhuman strength and speed, and also to defend themselves from *shen* abilities that should normally kill them with ease. That doesn’t mean Shih are invincible — far from it. But it does mean that they can ignore the traumatic effects of the *shen*’s attacks better than almost anyone. Shih can continue fighting when they should be unconscious or incapable of movement. And sometimes, if the situation is right, they can return the favor to their enemies.

BELIEF AND TRUE FAITH

The philosophies of Shih resemble True Faith, but they differ slightly. The Shih apprentice is indoctrinated into the world of the supernatural for 15 to 20 years and trained to fight against *shen* who overstep their bounds. During this time, they see proof of their beliefs and contemplate the implications during meditation every day. For Shih, their beliefs are as solid and necessary as the need to breathe air or consume food and water; it's as much a part of their existence as their fight against demons.

This strength of purpose allows the Shih to access their Chi in ways beyond mere control over their bodies. They can see the *shen* for what they are, no matter how clever the disguise or enchantment. Shih can wield their will as a tangible weapon, even imbue it into "enchanted" objects. Many Shih create prayers on paper, then store them for later deployment against their supernatural opponents.

There is a dark side to the Shih's beliefs. As Shih grow older, they realize that they could become exactly what they fight against. The balance they seek to create in the world takes its toll on them, if not in this life then in the existence that waits beyond. The demon hunters come to understand that by following their beliefs and practicing the art of demon hunting, they condemn themselves to a very special form of Hell. Indeed, a surprising number of Kuei-jin and the wraiths of the East belong to the long line of souls who once fought demons.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION

The physical trials of the Shih are at least as brutal as the training they endure mentally. Learning the art of war isn't a matter of avoiding a fight for the Shih, it's about surviving the fights they know are coming their way. Disciples are toughened and tempered like sword-grade steel from the very beginning of their training. Daily regimens include running for miles at a time, climbing sheer surfaces and hardening their bodies to withstand brutal combat. An average Shih's body is a barrage of scars, calluses and keloid tissue. The training itself causes some of these disfigurements.

When training for battle, Shih follow the tried-and-true methods of the Shaolin priests of old. Rather than striking at the air with their kicks and punches, they hit trees and rock walls, breaking their skin open repeatedly until it eventually thickens and toughens. When practicing with weapons, they use hard wooden tools and rough edges for the same reason. The masters understand the necessity of their students' suffering, for the *shen* are sure to do much worse once given the opportunity.

Many prospective disciples can't endure the Shih's brutal methods. Those who cannot are of no use, and of little interest, to the Shih. Weakness now means a horrible death later. In the cases of those who can't keep up with the strict training, their instructors sometimes feel obligated to hunt down and destroy the demons responsible for the deaths of those students' loved ones. In this way, the vows that students made are kept, and the Shih no longer feels any obligation to aid the erstwhile disciples.

HUMAN PREY

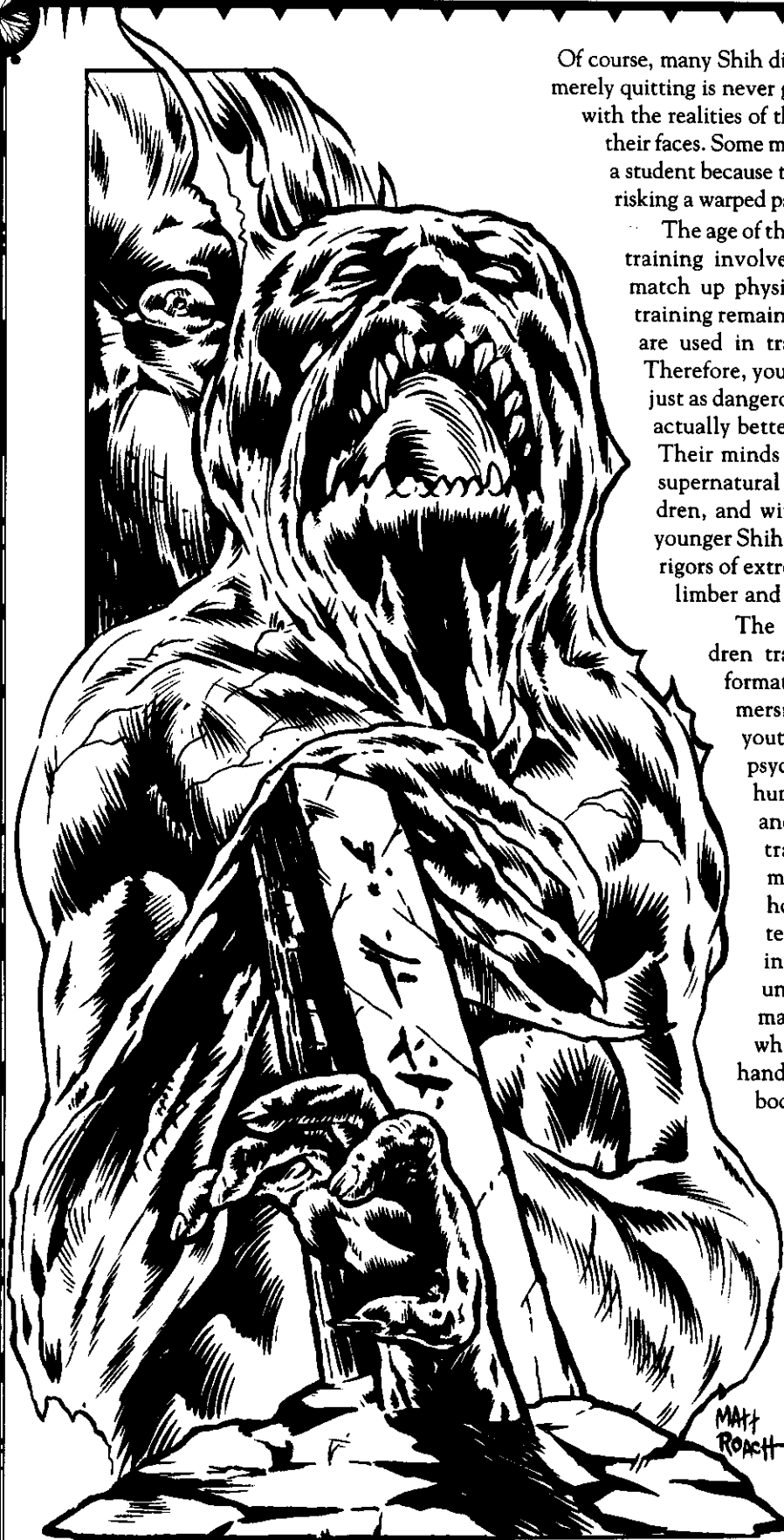
Having stated that the Shih don't hunt mortals, that now has to be clarified. The Shih hunt demons. For the most part, they prefer the supernatural variety, though they aren't above interfering when human predators have gone too far. Rapists, murderers, serial killers and narcotics traffickers have all had the misfortune of running across the Shih, who believe in always keeping themselves prepared for battle — and sometimes, humans are the best choice for opponents.

Shih seldom seek out human monsters deliberately, but they do frequently stumble across them. Demon hunters look for cases of extraordinary violence, often believing the crimes committed were actually performed by the *shen*. They've come to discover that the humans around them are sometimes just as corrupt as the demons. Merely being human doesn't let a monster off the hook in the eyes of the Shih. While it's true that many Shih have employed vices such as opium or liquor to numb their minds as the years went by, they still can't tolerate seeing others suffer for nothing.

Just as with the *shen*, the humans are left alone if they don't go too far. A little dope sold to the foolish is one trifle, but hooking children on heroin is another thing. A Shih would certainly interfere, and he wouldn't hesitate to shatter a few bones to emphasize his point.

Prostitution isn't so bad — in fact, a few Shih have been known to indulge when they've run across a little extra money and feel the need to relax. But selling children is a no-no. Most Shih have a special fondness for protecting children because their own childhoods were cut off so abruptly.

Large-scale drug operations are a favorite target, too. After all, a dozen or more thugs are often a good day's exercise for the Shih and, frankly, drug dealers normally have money. Demon hunting, as has already been stated, pays very poorly.



Of course, many Shih disciples are children, for whom the option of merely quitting is never given. The young wards of the Shih grow up with the realities of the supernatural world constantly thrust into their faces. Some masters consider it dangerous to take a child as a student because the lessons taught are brutal and harsh, often risking a warped psyche in the forging of the new Shih warrior.

The age of the student makes almost no difference in the training involved. Though a child can't be expected to match up physically with an adult, the intensity of the training remains the same throughout. The exact methods are used in training a 10-year-old and a young adult. Therefore, youngsters trained in the Shih combat arts are just as dangerous as their adult counterparts, and they are actually better equipped to handle the worst situations. Their minds haven't begun trying to reject the idea of supernatural entities. Belief comes easier for the children, and with that belief comes power. Additionally, younger Shih's bodies are better equipped to adapt to the rigors of extreme training — more capable of remaining limber and of growing both fast and strong.

The problems lie in the emotional area. Children trained as Shih warriors go through their formative years with a harsh master and an immersion in the supernatural. Sometimes the youths take on a zealotry that borders on psychosis. After all, why stop at the *shen*? A human predator is just as deadly if left alone, and he should be stopped. For those who are trained to continue fighting after being mauled by a werewolf, policemen's bullets hold little intimidation. Accordingly, Shih teachings emphasize caution when instructing the young. Shih make certain students understand that judging mortals is not their main responsibility. On the few occasions when students fail to learn these lessons, Shih handle the matter themselves by hiding the bodies where they aren't likely to be found.

THE DANGERS OF HUNTING DEMONS

Dealing with the supernatural has its risks, and Shih know this better than most. Aside from the physical perils — crippling blows that can leave a Shih warrior pulped beyond her ability to heal herself and, of course, death — demon hunting offers very real mental and emotional dangers.

Most Shih begin their careers with visions of crushing the foul *shen* and wiping them from the Middle Kingdom. They are inevitably disappointed. There are just too many creatures for any one warrior to destroy, no matter how driven, which scars the psyche of the Shih. Despite the training Shih endure to protect themselves from the Delirium, the Shroud, the Mists and other *shen* “mind-tricks,” the long-term effects of constant exposure to the demons takes its toll eventually. Being trained to see the world as it really is has a price, and for many Shih, that price is a certain amount of their own humanity.

Despite the legend of the Excellent Archer, Yi, the Shih are seldom as honorable as their founder. Bitterness, even hatred, often mars them. They sacrifice a great deal of their human lives to fight demons. They receive nothing in return. There are no physical rewards for their efforts, save the moneys they take from dead victims, and their constant encounters age them well before their time. It's not uncommon for a Shih in his late 20s to look twice his age. Physically, he might still accomplish phenomenal tasks, but he is likely to see himself deteriorate in leaps and bounds.





CHAPTER TWO: STRIKE FORCE ZERO

The time of the shen is no more. We must destroy them, or they will surely destroy us.

— Geichin Okamoto, founder of Strike Force Zero

The Shih have been around for millennia. They've battled demons for nearly as long as recorded history. The battle is one they've been steadily losing for almost as long. Now they have help — though most don't want the assistance they're getting.

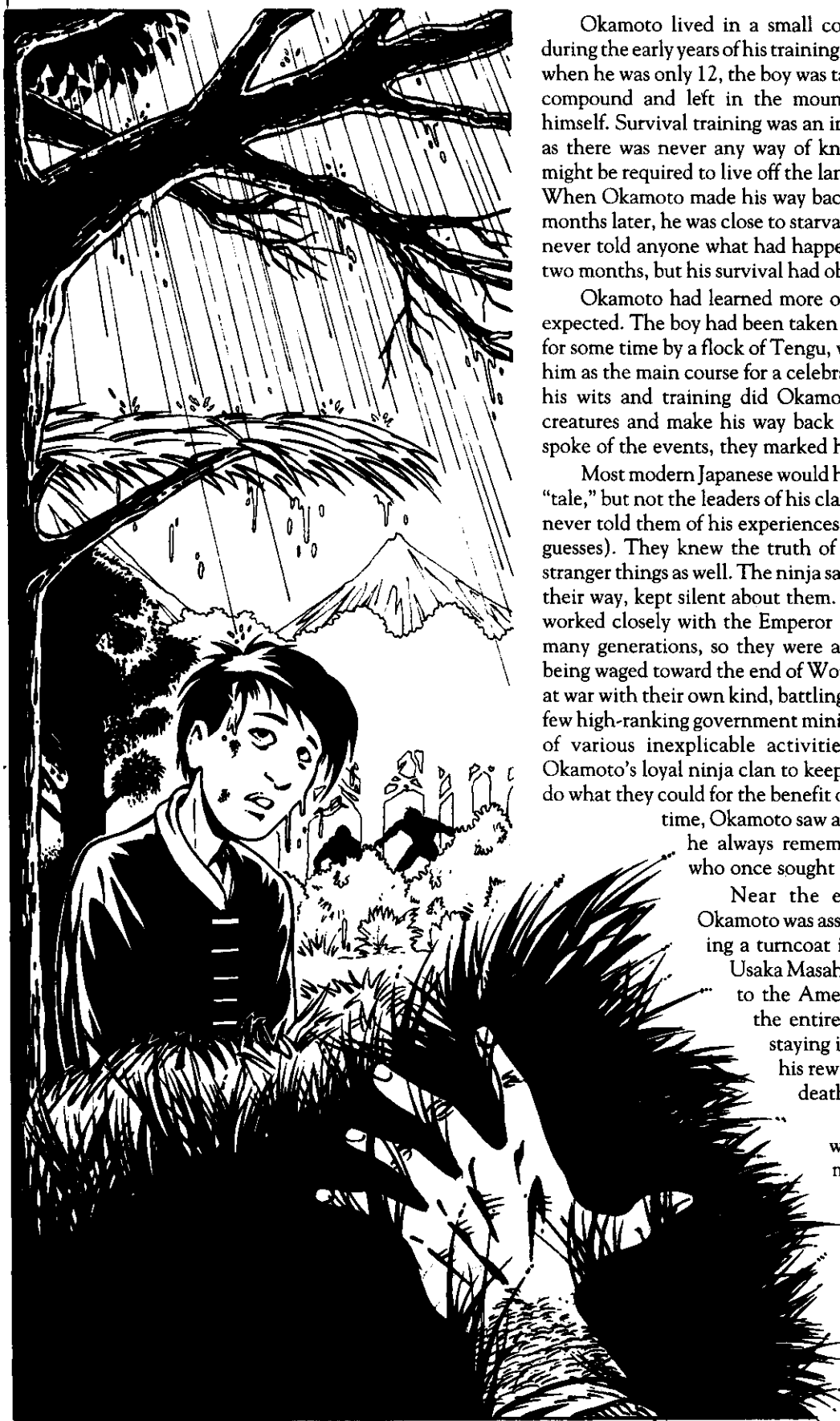
Strike Force Zero is a top-secret agency known only to the highest echelons of the Japanese government. Its agents — renegades deemed too uncontrollable (or brilliant) for conventional service — protect Nippon and surrounding areas from “paranormal” threats. The agency is the creation of one man: Geichin Okamoto. But just as Yi was not a normal man, Okamoto has a few secrets of his own. Okamoto didn't even exist before World War II. In times long past, he answered to a different name, and the traditions of his family belonged to a very different calling.

The Shih and Strike Force Zero have little in common, save for the fact that they hunt demons. The two groups' difference in beliefs about the *shen* is easy enough to understand: The Shih have been around for thousands of years, and their founder believed that even the demons had a natural place in the order of the world. Geichin Okamoto, by contrast, has personally met with demons only twice in his life. He was supposed to be the main course at their dinner in one case and, in the other, Okamoto saw a man incinerated

in seconds. (That he was there to kill the same man is irrelevant in his eyes.) More importantly, the second demon that Geichin met told him about the blast that would destroy Nagasaki, and this is the thought that bothers him the most. These creatures can see the future, some of them at least, and that sort of power can't be left waiting around, especially in the hands of monsters. They must be destroyed before they can manipulate the future and put an end to mankind.

There's no chance of changing Okamoto's outlook on these matters: The demons are a travesty. They should never have existed in the first place, and there is no time like the present to see the matter handled.

The man now called “Geichin Okamoto” was the traditionalist in his family, and he was one of the best in a long line of ninja. While his family no longer existed — officially, anyway — they still worked for the emperor as spies and, if needed, as assassins. As with several of the ninja families, Okamoto's clan chose to maintain the traditions of feudal times, adapting only in how they worked for certain political factions. Okamoto received training as a youth in assassination and in the ways of hunting humans. Ever loyal to the cause, Okamoto never questioned the assignments he was given — such was his duty.



Okamoto lived in a small community in rural Japan during the early years of his training. As a part of this training, when he was only 12, the boy was taken away from the ninja compound and left in the mountain forests to fend for himself. Survival training was an important part of ninjitsu, as there was never any way of knowing how long a ninja might be required to live off the land when stalking a target. When Okamoto made his way back to the clan almost two months later, he was close to starvation and traumatized. He never told anyone what had happened to him during those two months, but his survival had obviously been a close call.

Okamoto had learned more of the world than anyone expected. The boy had been taken from the woods and held for some time by a flock of Tengu, who'd planned on having him as the main course for a celebratory feast. Only through his wits and training did Okamoto escape from the vile creatures and make his way back home. While he seldom spoke of the events, they marked him forever.

Most modern Japanese would have scoffed at Okamoto's "tale," but not the leaders of his clan (and, though Okamoto never told them of his experiences, they made some shrewd guesses). They knew the truth of the Tengu and of many stranger things as well. The ninja saw many sights and, as was their way, kept silent about them. But Okamoto's clan also worked closely with the Emperor of Japan, as they had for many generations, so they were aware of the silent battle being waged toward the end of World War II. The *shen* were at war with their own kind, battling the demons of China. A few high-ranking government ministers who were suspicious of various inexplicable activities along the front used Okamoto's loyal ninja clan to keep an eye on progress — to do what they could for the benefit of the empire. During this time, Okamoto saw a lot of strange things, and he always remembered the bird-monsters who once sought to sup on his flesh.

Near the end of World War II, Okamoto was assigned the duty of destroying a turncoat in Nagasaki. The traitor, Usaka Masahito, had sent information to the Americans that allegedly put the entire country at risk. He was staying in a prominent hotel, and his reward from the emperor was death.

Geichin Okamoto waited patiently in this man's room, silent as a shadow and barely breathing. Masahito was to know the reason for his death, for his assassin was to share that information with him.

Apparently, though, others also had a similar desire to see Masahito dead. After several hours of waiting, Okamoto's patience was rewarded by the man returning to his room to rest. A woman of exquisite beauty, who was dressed in the traditional clothes of a concubine, was with him.

Okamoto, the assassin, waited diligently as the two undressed and gained knowledge about one another's bodies. When they were finished, the woman began asking Masahito questions; she subtly probed him until he bragged about how he had betrayed Nippon. Masahito spoke of the wealth he would receive and the position of power he would have when the Allies ruled over Japan. The woman listened raptly.

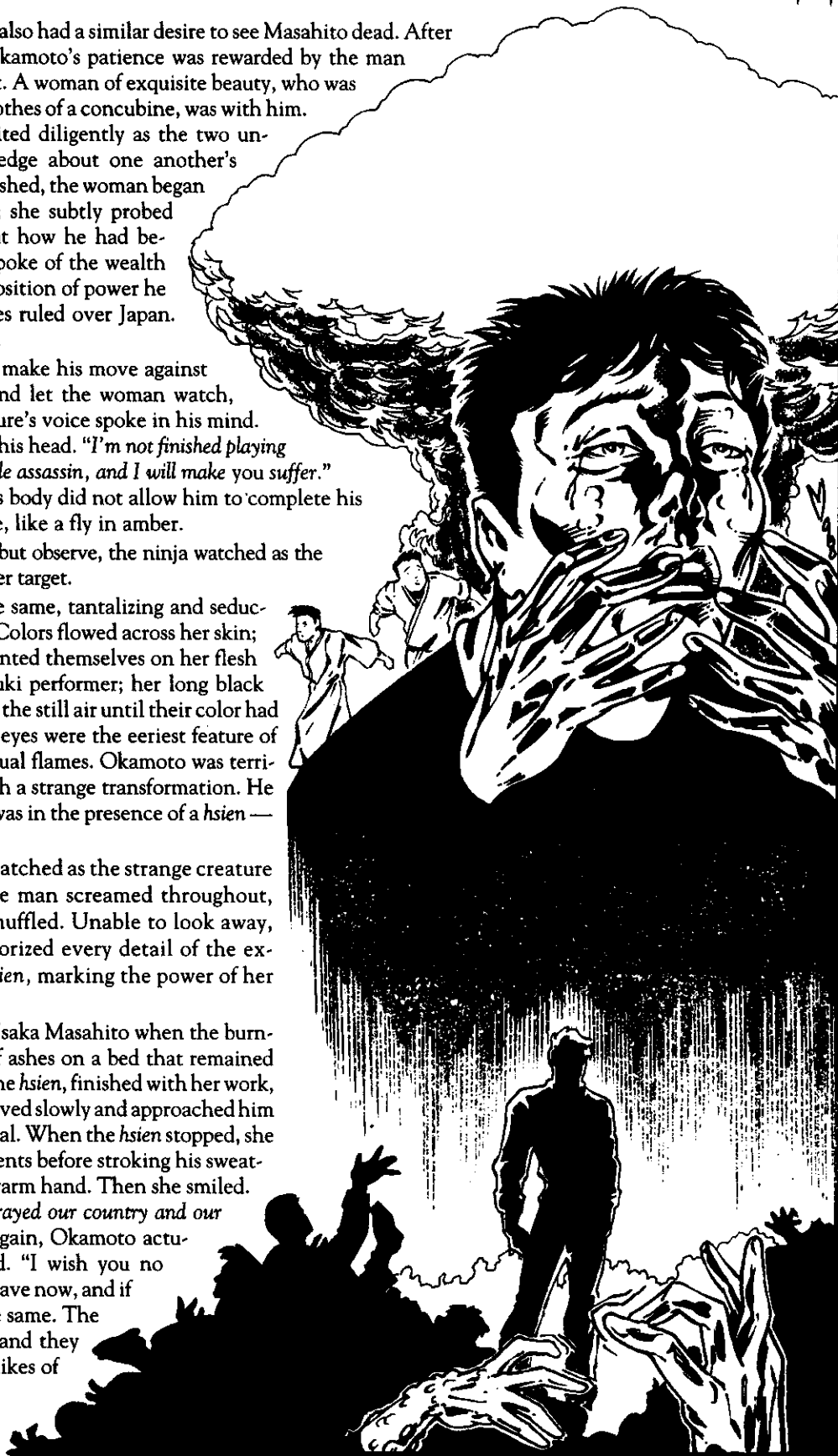
Okamoto was ready to make his move against the betrayer, to kill him and let the woman watch, when the enchanting creature's voice spoke in his mind. "Not yet," she whispered in his head. *"I'm not finished playing with him. Move too soon, little assassin, and I will make you suffer."* Try as he might, Okamoto's body did not allow him to complete his task. He was frozen in place, like a fly in amber.

Unable to do anything but observe, the ninja watched as the woman revealed herself to her target.

Her body remained the same, tantalizing and seductive, but her face changed. Colors flowed across her skin; streaks of red and white painted themselves on her flesh until she resembled a Kabuki performer; her long black tresses flowed and shifted in the still air until their color had faded to a pale yellow. Her eyes were the eeriest feature of all, as they burned with actual flames. Okamoto was terrified. Never had he seen such a strange transformation. He knew immediately that he was in the presence of a *hsien* — one of the spirit-people.

Paralyzed, Okamoto watched as the strange creature incinerated Masahito. The man screamed throughout, but the sound was oddly muffled. Unable to look away, Okamoto noted and memorized every detail of the execution. He studied the *hsien*, marking the power of her presence in his memory.

All that remained of Usaka Masahito when the burning had ended was a pile of ashes on a bed that remained untouched by the flames. The *hsien*, finished with her work, turned to Okamoto. She moved slowly and approached him as she would a trapped animal. When the *hsien* stopped, she stared at him for long moments before stroking his sweat-soaked skin with her soft, warm hand. Then she smiled. "He deserved to die. He betrayed our country and our people." When she spoke again, Okamoto actually heard her speak aloud. "I wish you no harm, little assassin. I will leave now, and if you are wise you will do the same. The true fires come here soon, and they will not be stopped by the likes of me, or you."



The creature moved away from him then, her body glowing with the light of a small sun. She drifted from the window of the hotel room as a ball of luminescence and soared toward the heavens faster than any wind could carry her.

When she left, Okamoto could move again. He quickly gathered the victim's ashes and fled into the night. Two days later, Okamoto was back in Tokyo, where he reported to his *jonin* all that he had seen. Nagasaki and Hiroshima were incinerated days later in a nuclear fury.

The defeat of Japan was a formidable blow to its citizens, as 150,000 people had died in a matter of seconds, and the slow deaths of so many more over the next months were equally horrifying. The screams of the dead were in the souls of the Middle Kingdom's living. Okamoto was among them. The *shen* had been speaking to him, perhaps; or his own mind was strong and determined as it had always been. He felt this fear itself. In either case, from that day forward, Okamoto saw and heard a world that was beyond his. He became aware of the darker aspects of reality, and he never forgot any of it.

The end of World War II caused radical changes in Japan. For Okamoto, the greatest change was the loss of his family and the way of life he'd always known. The *jonin* of his clan decided the time had come to reform the ninja family. While a few protested that the *shen* had not accepted this as a sign of the times, Okamoto accepted this as a sign of the times. Okamoto one of the few knew the true reason for the decision. Though it took some doing, the wishes of the remaining family members were changed, and the select group that remained began the next phase in the family transition. The clan became business magnates.

Geichin Okamoto was the one given to the assassin. He accepted the name and for a time the identity of the assassin grew into the role of the young business leader that the family wanted him to be. Okamoto eventually became the president of his own company, Dynamic Technology International, a company destined to create some of the most amazing technological breakthroughs of the 20th century.

DTI specializes in new ways of battling disease and crippling ailments, often redefining the use of technology and medicine in the process. Many of the cloned enzymes used in modern medicine were started or perfected by DTI. As well, still on the DTI drawing board are several replacement limbs that will allow para- and quadriplegics to use their arms and walk again.

All of this is common knowledge, easily attained by reading DTI's press releases. What remains far more secret are DTI's more radical technological breakthroughs. Cybernetic implants, wetware, and full-scale cloning have all become a part of the research and development wing at DTI. Okamoto's company redefines "cutting edge" on an almost daily basis.

Why? Because Okamoto needs DTI's money to finance the main impetus for his ninja family's dissolution. The crowning achievement of almost 50 years of effort has finally begun to come to fruition in the top-secret organization that Okamoto and his family have built — Strike Force Zero.

Okamoto's family never gave up their original work, but they changed the path it took, which required time and energy in addition to amazing amounts of money. The "official" ninja family is no more, and in its place are some of the most highly regarded businesspeople and politicians in Japan. Many of the original family members are dead, but their children, who were taught and raised to replace them when the time came, are very much alive and influential in modern-day Japan. The tactics have changed, but the power to pull these and greater than ever before.

Remnants of Okamoto's ninja clan do still exist, but they no longer deal in ordinary assassinations. Geichin Okamoto leads that clan and has created Strike Force Zero — a specialized government agency that deals in the eradication of things that should not exist.

Strike Force Zero is, officially, a rumor and little more. Only the most highly placed officials in the Japanese government know of its existence. Even these officials believe that Strike Force Zero is designed to deal with the increasing threat of terrorism and the global drug trade. There is some truth to this belief. SFO's assignments routinely force agents to deal with the worst elements of the underworld, and the agency has more power than the Japanese government is comfortable with. Strike Force Zero has 50 active agents with licenses to kill. These agents are even allowed, through secret trade agreements, to act in China and Russia. And they report to Geichin Okamoto and him alone. If not for Okamoto's connections to many influential businesspeople and government officials, the Strike Force would already have been dissolved.

That's what the Japanese government believes. The reality is quite different.

Strike Force Zero does indeed have license to kill in Japan, China and Russia. The agents also have special dispensation in India, Taiwan, North and South Korea, and Vietnam. This isn't ordinarily the case, but the original ninja clan now headed by Okamoto is very good at keeping dark secrets, and it is even better at finding the skeletons in the closets of important people.

SFO does chase after the worst aspects of human filth, hunting child pornographers, serial killers, rapists, drug traders and slavers. They do so with a gusto that puts the FBI to shame. And they handle terrorists with a savage efficiency. Why? Because the very scum who deal in these trades are all too often working for the *shen*. Okamoto knows the truth about the demons, at least some of it, and he understands that monsters tend to hide themselves behind mortals. The mortals they hide behind, not surprisingly, are those whose stock in trade require the ability to commit evil acts.

So Strike Force Zero deals harshly with the human element of violent and dangerous crime. The agency also does its best to uncover the supernatural elements behind those crimes. If, in the process, they can make the world a better place, that's just a bonus in Geichin Okamoto's perspective.

The Force is only nine years old. In the time since its inception, the roster of active agents has gone through numerous fluctuations, primarily as a result of those killed in action; the agency has historically lost a high percentage of operatives per year. One of SFO's first mistakes involved where they got their agents. Most of the first-run ones were military specialists and police officers who had a tendency to be antisocially aggressive — the more aggressive the better, in the eyes of the Strike Force. What Okamoto hadn't counted on was these agents' lack of imagination and emotional resiliency. Those best suited for combat often weren't prepared to deal with the existence of monsters.

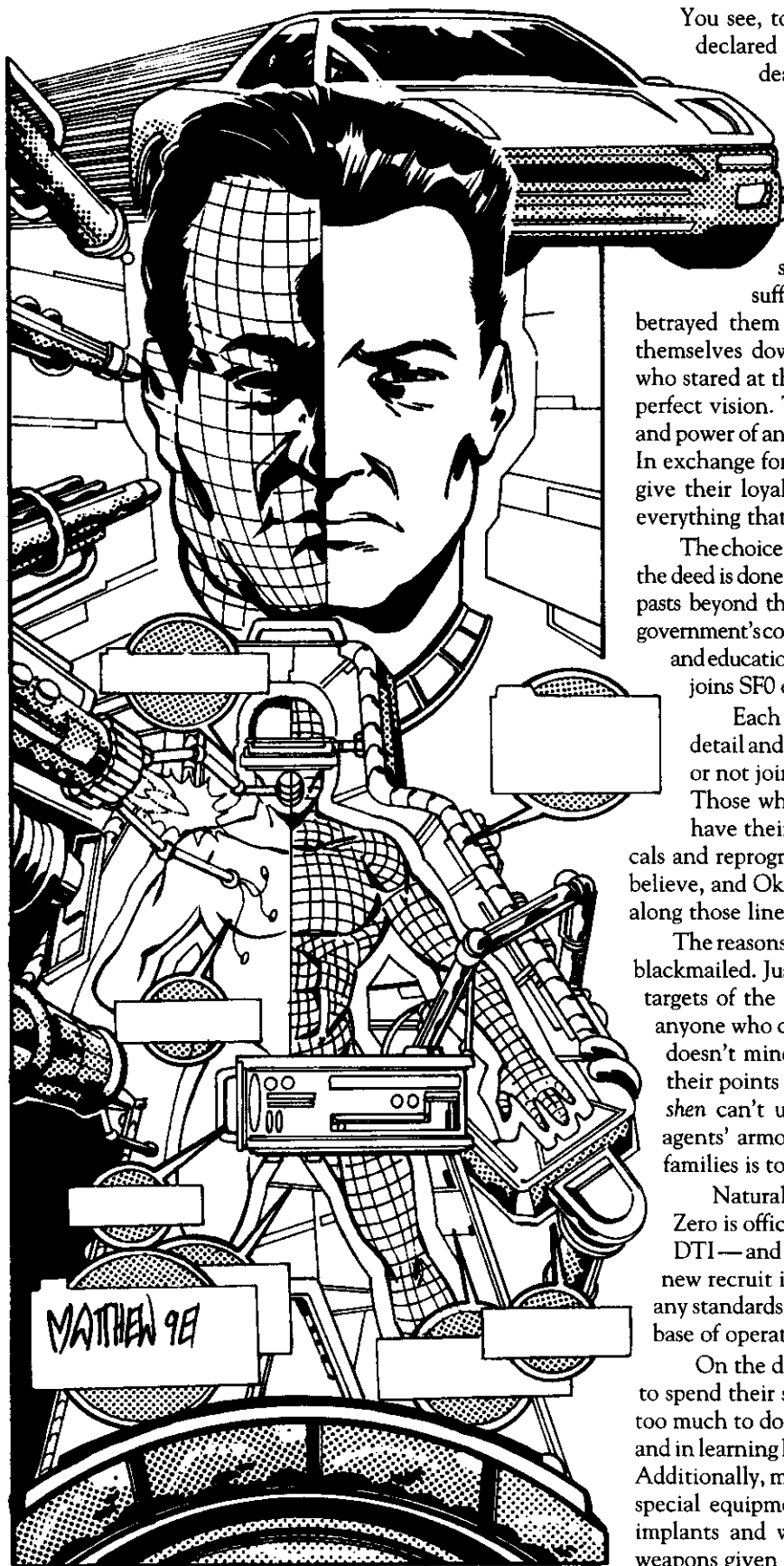
Presently, Strike Force Zero recruits many of its agents from entirely different stock. New ones come from the unemployment line or from the colleges and schools of higher learning. Many agents are the very people least likely to fit into normal society — some are violent and uncivilized, others so quiet that they seem to fade into the background. Most are more adept at video games than at speaking to the opposite sex. In short, they are "goobs" — dreamers and outcasts who spend more time surfing the Internet or playing roleplaying games than trying to fit in.

These people are chosen because their minds are more open to the possibilities of the paranormal. As recruits, they are more resistant to the horror induced by the supernatural. While the Strike Force still recruits from the military and the police forces, newer agents are chosen for their mental flexibility rather than their martial prowess.

SFO also recruits agents from even shadier backgrounds. Some of the agency's best come from the dirtier aspects of modern life in Japan. There are six members of the Strike Force currently who once belonged to the Yakuza. Their "recruitment spiel" was intelligible enough: "Join the Strike Force or do the time for every crime we can pin on you. Oh, and did we mention that your sterling reputation in the organization is being smeared even as we speak? Word has it that you're giving us every bit of dirt you can on your colleagues, trying very hard to plea-bargain your case. I doubt you'd be very welcome with your friends right about now." Once the criminals agree to join, they find themselves enjoying the anonymity offered by the Force.

Additionally, SFO has several parapsychologists within the ranks: specialists in supernatural legend and lore, ghost hunters, even — with serious trepidation — the occasional medium. They're all welcome, so long as they don't mind having to die first....





You see, to join the Strike Force, a new agent must be declared legally dead. The agency fakes its recruit's death, stages a funeral and creates a new identity.

No one — not friends, not family, not loved ones — is privy to this deception. Agents are mourned by their families, and life goes on for loved ones and agents alike. Each agent undergoes a radical transformation, from the shape of the face to the color and texture of skin. Many of the best minds recruited by SFO suffer from physical frailties: Those whose bodies betrayed them now walk on two legs instead of wheeling themselves down the corridors in their wheelchairs. Those who stared at the world through coke-bottle lenses now have perfect vision. The physically frail now move with the grace and power of an athlete in the prime of their competitive lives. In exchange for a new life and a new body, they have only to give their loyalty to Strike Force Zero and say good-bye to everything that made them what they were.

The choice is theirs to make, but there is no turning back once the deed is done. Strike Force is comprised of agents who have no pasts beyond that which is printed on paper and listed in the government's computers. Fingerprints, retinal scans, dental records and educational histories are falsified and planted. No one who joins SFO ever comes out of the procedure alive.

Each potential agent has this process explained in detail and is given one hour in isolation to decide whether or not joining the program is the right decision for him. Those who say "yes" become agents. Those who refuse have their memories of the encounter erased by chemicals and reprogramming. It's easier than most people want to believe, and Okamoto's agency is capable of working miracles along those lines.

The reasons are simple enough: People with families can be blackmailed. Just as surely as SFO is a covert organization, the targets of the agency are capable of heinous crimes against anyone who crosses their path. More importantly, the Force doesn't mind using the families of their enemies to make their points known. With no past to connect them to, the *shen* can't use that particular weak link to slip beneath agents' armor. A difficult feat, yes, but the safety of their families is too important for the agents to jeopardize.

Naturally, there are compensations. While Strike Force Zero is officially a government agency, salaries are paid by DTI — and agents are paid handsomely. Furthermore, each new recruit is supplied with an apartment that is lavish by any standards and almost preposterous in Tokyo, where their base of operations is located.

On the downside, the agents get very little opportunity to spend their salaries or enjoy their living quarters: There is too much to do. A great deal of their time is spent in training and in learning how to use the weapons and tools they're issued. Additionally, many of the tools that the agents use require that special equipment be grafted to their systems — cybernetic implants and wetware patches that ensure security for the weapons given to the agents.

MATTHEW 9E

LIFESTYLE OF THE SECRET AGENT

Agents don't have it easy, even in their desk jobs. Each Strike Force team is five strong, and each member is chosen carefully to ensure that all members of a team-to-be complement each other. Extensive batteries of personality and aptitude tests are only the first step in grouping together a new team. Also, members are tested for how well they think in crisis situations. After several mock field tests, the DTI specialists then choose who is the commander and who is the second-in-command. The least likely candidates sometimes end up in charge because the tests reveal they are the most stable and capable. Each member of the Strike Team is given a rank in the official military; while this rank has no effect on how the agents are paid, it is necessary for them to have cooperation with the military powers. The first two commanders earn the automatic rank of Major, the next two earn Captain rank, and all other members of the team are granted the rank of Lieutenant. Agents must follow proper military protocol and adhere to the chain of command. While these rankings are officially unofficial, agents are expected to follow military rankings only when necessary. Violation of the military code of ethics is not permitted while employed in their military ranks.

The next step is specialization. Each team has a computer hacker (cyber-rat), a demolitions expert, a stealth expert (thief, assassin or cutthroat), a medic and a research expert/psychologist (specialist in the field). They are used in the simplest way to describe the abilities of each field expert. The primary task of each agent is to find and eliminate the "bad guys." In the case of a demon, the elimination most often means capture. In the case of a monster, elimination most often means destruction. Executions can be made if the team feels it cannot contain the demon, and bring it back in for examination. Demons are more likely to reveal more of their nature than the monsters ever could.

Much of the field units' research involves tracking the monsters back to their lairs. Once a location is found and isolated, every item is labeled, numbered, and put up for a retrieval team. At the agents' discretion, they may take found items if they believe these items to be useful in immediate investigations. Field operatives are surprisingly high in the ranks of Strike Force Zero; this method of work is remarkably similar to what forensic specialists do, and most agents have at least a rudimentary skill in the forensic arts.

The members of a field unit are well-trained in their specialties. Most could find very high-paying jobs in the civilian world, but they prefer the work they do at SFO. The Force is a unique opportunity, and many team members have personal reasons for hunting down monsters.

Each team is assembled under the notion that it should be able to solve almost any case dropped on its members' desks. To this end, Strike Force teams receive substantial resources; coupled with the training they receive, little is beyond their ability when it comes to investigation. Entire divisions of researchers are available to analyze whatever

new and interesting items a team might find, though it might take a while to get an answer back to the field agents. Further, Okamoto spent years and millions of yen assembling a very large library of rare documents and historical lore. Aside from the problem of translating some of the older texts and finding the actual references that the agents think *might* be in Okamoto's massive library of information, there's little to stand in their way.

Hunting down monsters is the easy part. Finding out where the monsters are so that the hunting can begin is more difficult. One of the tasks that offers the most danger, and which the agents must perform constantly, is the infiltration of other groups. Tongs, the Yakuza, triads and shady corporations. Many of these organizations are hiding places for monsters. They are also reservoirs of clues. While SFO occasionally sends agents to the streets or in the local nightclub, the majority of the most powerful *shen* are hidden well from mortal eyes. The majority of SFO operatives end up learning a good bit about the underbelly of society, if they don't already know about it.

THE STRIKE FORCE ZERO PHILOSOPHY

There are two views of the supernatural in a very different way. The first view is that the supernatural is real. The latter view is that the supernatural is only those demons that the Force must deal with equal impunity. The first view is that the supernatural is real, but the Strike Force, but the latter view is that the supernatural is only those demons that the Force must deal with equal impunity. Unless there's a good reason for it, the odds are against the supernatural.

There are living, breathing entities that exist. They are monsters who've spent centuries of time hunting humans and feeding on the flesh of the world. Okamoto has dedicated the majority of his life to ensuring that the monsters are not created, and he goes about his work with a fanatical devotion into the territory of fanaticism.

There are human monsters as well, and they too should be eradicated. The *shintas*, the Lightning People...sorcerers by any other name. They deal with the *shen* and gain power from them. They consort with werewolves and mate with *gaki*. They are, in short, willing servants of the demons. *Shintas* are among the most dangerous sort of monsters because they hide themselves in plain sight and are virtually impossible to detect through technological means.

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One of the earliest trials for Okamoto's Strike Force came when it dealt with a devil-worshipping cult that intended to sacrifice hundreds of people to its demon masters. In an effort to free their banished demon master, a demented group of *shintas* and their servants captured hundreds of North Koreans by promising jobs and food, and they managed to

commit a series of horrid atrocities on over half of their victims before the Strike Force even showed up. The powers of the demon worshippers taught SF0 an important lesson about the evils men are capable of, and they cost the lives of all but one member of the first two Strike Teams. In the end, the very demon that the cultists tried to bring forth devoured them for their failure to free it. The one remaining agent could tell the story only while under hypnosis, and she has never been the same since.

Thus, there is no room for mercy in the Strike Force. Evil must be destroyed and, as many in the Middle Kingdom can attest, evil often wears a pretty face to hide its true intent. A friendly gesture, an effort to aid the Strike Force, even saving the life of an agent...all of these are suspect. These gestures are just another reason to destroy any *shen* the Force might encounter.

To indoctrinate this attitude in agents, new SF0 Teams undergo a series of desensitization exercises. Once the agents are finally ready for the field, they are given cases that deal with the more mundane aspects of their job. The cases that new teams are sent on have already been investigated by a veteran Strike Team. These cases become low priority if there are no supernatural forces at work. The Strike Force keeps notes, maintains any connections its members have made, and saves the case for one of the less experienced Strike Teams to investigate from scratch.

The new team then studies the case, gathers all the details and infiltrates the organization as its members see fit. Their information is compared to what is already known, and they are "graded" on the results. When the bust finally comes, the more experienced Strike Team is often sent in as backup, but the collar goes to the new Strike Team.

Through a series of cases like these, the team gains confidence in its abilities and the Strike Force evaluates them. Each case leads slowly and inexorably to the truth that demons are real, and each reveals more of their hideous nature to the Strike Team. When the time for a full-scale encounter does come around, the team is ready to deal with the monsters as harshly as they must in order to survive and protect the human populace.



THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF *SHEN*

In its existence, SF0 has become aware that a baffling variety of demons haunt the Middle Kingdom. Below is a list of creatures the SF0 knows to exist, and Geichin Okamoto's personal opinions of the same.

The Hungry Dead, a.k.a. Gaki

Top Secret: File # 1772-C

The Hungry Dead are a dangerous lot. The legends surrounding these creatures are nowhere near complete enough to my satisfaction. These foul demons rise from the grave in the bodies of the dead and feed on the lives of people, animals and even the land. These creatures are seductive and filled with false promises. Though they are not the most common demons, they are among the vilest, for they have ruled over much of the world on several occasions — at least if what we've been able to record of their confessions is true. The Hungry Dead are a blight on the history of humanity, and from what information we've gleaned, their European counterparts are no better.

Although several of these entities have been captured and tortured, they speak only under extreme duress. In the case of Subject #4, she began telling us what we wanted to know only after we had removed her legs just above the knees. There was no blood. Fascinating.

They are to be hunted and destroyed with extreme prejudice. Many of these foul walking dead have even managed to mate with humans and produce living versions of themselves that are surely just as dangerous, and almost always live in the cities.

Vivisection, while educational, also proves to be fruitless as a means of learning much that is useful. The Hungry Dead are weakened in daylight hours, and it's best to hunt them when they are in their weakened state. Most frightening is that these entities often manipulate the cities where they dwell, and they sometimes have enough political power to make hunting them near impossible. Of all the *shen*, these are the subtlest and most deadly. They've attempted to gain information on three separate occasions by capturing Strike Force operatives and tearing the knowledge from their minds. If not for the charges implanted in the skulls of these agents, the demons could have learned about the locations of our bases. The knowledge remained safe, but the agents died. All three have been avenged, but I can't help feeling the weight of their deaths.

Kumo

Top Secret: File # 1138-S

The Goblin Spiders of old myth are real, and they are nearly impossible to destroy. Not only are they superhuman-tough and durable, but they can transform themselves into an army of spiders. The recent addition of poison-gas guns has been successful in containing the one surviving Goblin Spider we've captured to date.

An interesting development in the case of subject # 1138-S: While the original body of the monster is gone, indeed incinerated, after it tried escaping the vivisection chamber, the remaining specimens from the original *shen* are busily rebuilding themselves into new collective bodies. Of the 17 spiders captured and isolated after they escaped the original form, 14 of them have not only consumed any insects placed in the chambers with them, but they have also actually increased in mass! I believe these individual arachnids may be trying to grow themselves back to the size of the original Kumo. Do they know about each other? I suspect so, as all of the subjects were observed on camera when we dissected the three that weren't growing as quickly. In each case, their state of agitation was very obvious. If not for the electrified barriers around their cages, I'd fear for the safety of keeping these monsters alive at all.

Note: Vivisection is not a wise method of dealing with the Kumo. When the first subject was sliced open and the probes were inserted, the surgeons suffered from an eruption of small, venomous spiders spilling from the chest and cranial cavities. The variety of arachnids these creatures can produce is also frightening. A specialist I contacted to identify the various species of arachnid within the creature claims that many of the spiders were from other countries. Worse, most of them are capable of producing toxins lethal even in an animal as large as a human being. As is evidenced by what happened to poor Toru Kagami, the larger versions of these demons emit an equally lethal venom. The bastards are not invulnerable, however; fire, electricity and industrial-strength nerve-toxins all work quite well on these creatures.

Hypothesis: The demons inhabiting the Kumo are apparently capable of taking on multiple forms. One must wonder if a Kumo is a spider-*shen* possessing a human body or a humanoid *shen* possessing a spider and forcing it to consume its relatives. Either way, the end result is hideous in its implications.

Werewolves

Top Secret: File # 0021-B

The good news is that the European legends of these creatures infecting others with their bites seem exaggerated. Agent Enicho has shown no indication of becoming a werewolf, even when exposed to the full moon. Efforts to study the legends of the werewolf as portrayed by Hollywood seem largely to have been a waste of time, though the silver bullets do, in fact, work very well. Still, werewolves are amazingly hard to kill.

The regenerative capabilities of these creatures are very surprising. Only two days after the sensory organs were removed from Subject 4, the eyes, ears and nose have regrown and seem fully functional. Scorching a wound with silver and fire seems to prevent this regenerative ability. Additionally, contact with silver produces a pronounced reaction, similar to the application of a concentrated acid. Subjects 2, 3, and 12 have not recovered from their wounds, and both 8 and 9 are dead at this time. Silver shackles are not recommended for restraining these creatures. In the case of Subject 8, accidental burns to the neck and limbs are apparently the cause of death. Silver at room temperature produces much the same results as a blowtorch. Fascinating.

These *shen* are capable of taking on human form and might even be related by blood, but it's hard to say with any certainty. I have my doubts about the blood relations: Several reverted to a human form when killed, while others transformed into wolves, and some remained as they were when they died. Most unsettling is the effect these creatures have on humans when they reveal themselves in their true form: If not for the stabilizing effects of the panic suppressors, most of the agents would likely have run screaming when they saw them.

The 500-amp tasers seem to work very well for incapacitating these creatures, though, in a few cases, it took more than one charge before they fell. Happily, the incident with Subject 7 was apparently a unique case. Once he disappeared from his cell, we were certain he would return with reinforcements. We were right, and we were prepared. What we did not expect was that they would all appear in the very cell from which Subject 7 escaped. While we are still working on just *how* Subject 7 managed to disappear and reappear, we have come no closer to an answer. Yoshi thinks the creature became a heavy gas and dropped through the floor, but the only difference between his room and the others was the presence of an observational mirror. Why, then, didn't the others leave their cells in a similar fashion, and why would they all return to the same location? I'm just glad Yoshi thought to arm the guards with silver in the event that the demons returned.

Note: Silver should be tried on the other shapechangers. I especially look forward to seeing the results on the Tengu. I recognized the one with the deep scar on his beak. I believe I shall test the silver on him myself.

Kuei

Top Secret: File # 1356-D

Ghosts. I never really allowed myself to believe that such things exist. The concept of dying and then utterly remaining behind, stuck in a limbo where I can do little to alter the world around me, has always made me ill.

Now that I know ghosts are real, something will have to be done to ease their burdens. Huan's ectoplasm detectors work very well. They're small enough to conceal in an ordinary set of glasses, but rather fragile. We'll have to work on that. Better than that, Huan believes he'll soon have a way of manipulating the ectoplasm. We will either be able to capture these entities, or be able to destroy them.

I think I prefer the destruction myself. A mercy killing for those that refuse to die.

What Huan hasn't been able to explain is why so many of the ghosts resemble nothing even remotely human. Perhaps further examination would be wise.

Possessed Entities

Top Secret: File # 1356-E

Huan's ectoplasmic extractor works, but a few small problems remain. First, the damned thing still causes some damage to the human host. Second, the E-extractor seems to work only on certain types of spirits. I'm very confused by this. The more humanoid spirits are easily ignited and dissolved, provided they can be caught in the discharge. But some of the others ignore the effects of the rays, or suffer less from the E-extractor's assault.

Are there more than just ghosts at work here? Definitely time to do more research on the nature of spirits. Huan believes some of these entities are actually demons. Take into consideration those humans who experience an actual physical metamorphosis when possessed, as opposed to those who merely act differently from the ways they normally do.

Different types of spiritual possession: Ghosts, demons and maybe even stranger things. Fortunately, Huan remains convinced that all such possessions can be counteracted simply by adjusting the E-extractor's frequency. The best news of all regarding the E-extractor is that human hosts, while injured by the weapon, normally live through the process. The trauma is still too much for my liking, but I suspect we can handle that as well, given a little more time.

Clothes, paper and material objects are unaffected by the E-extractor and, just as importantly, the energy discharge is unaffected by them, which means that agents can target an incorporeal entity through a building without having to worry about the side effects on the building itself.

Note: The oddly distorted "landscapes" seen through the E-detectors seem to suffer damage when struck by the E-extractor. Yoshi reports seeing something like a typhoon appear to destroy these phantom buildings when the E-extractor was trained on them for an extended time. Minute stress lines also appeared in the actual buildings targeted in the test, but they were so minor that no one noticed them at first. I tend to be cautious and suspect the E-extractor caused these new faults. I'm glad we chose buildings marked for destruction when we finally got around to the field tests. Do these phantom buildings have a connection to the real ones? Sources point to yes. From what Yoshi says, there are actual physical similarities.

Secondary Note: Huan believes he may be able to reduce the weapon's substantial energy drain by supplementing the batteries with a bioelectrical source. It might be possible to reduce the size of the E-extractor by powering the weapon using the natural energies of the person carrying the device. As with all of our weapons, size matters. Anything too large or too bulky is bound to be wasted in a combat situation.

Tengu

Top Secret: File # 7444-E

Despite my earlier hopes, silver doesn't seem to work on the Tengu, though it works on most other shapechanging creatures. Quite by accident, however, I discovered that gold does. Scar Beak screamed when I ran the gold ring on my hand across his chest during our last interrogation. Just to check, I did it again and watched the flesh burn. I must confess to a certain indecorous delight in running my wedding ring across his arms and watching the tendons sizzle. I'd wager that even if he were to break free from us, he won't find it quite as easy to swoop down from the sky and carry off any more children.

Sorcerers

Top Secret: File # 1331-H

Sorcerers. I am once again shocked to discover that such beings exist. My own family was accused of many magical feats over the centuries, but the truth is that we were physically skilled and adept at trickery. But, these *shintas* are a serious threat: We have no way to detect them, and no way to defend against them. I don't like the feeling that we might be exposed to their ministrations should they decide to investigate us.

The Black Demon Tong: In all the time we hunted them down, I never expected they were more than a gang being led by a vampire. Now, I see there are far worse things than the Hungry Dead.

The American agent, Walters, was literally turned inside out — not just the meat and internal organs, but his bones as well. Whatever attacked him crammed all of his soft tissues into a space the size of a toilet bowl and wrapped the bones around them. Not possible? I saw the evidence myself. Worst of all, he was still alive when we got there. How he managed to scream with his lungs in that condition is beyond me.

Yoshi was in tears. He couldn't pull the trigger on Walters. I handled the matter myself. I'm almost certain I heard Walters thank me. At least I'll let myself believe I heard that.

But I digress. These aberrations cannot be allowed to continue. These sorcerers, they must all be destroyed. No one should be able to warp reality with such impunity. Rock walls should not move of their own volition, and the roots of trees should not attack humans. I will not tolerate their continuation.

I need to study the tapes again. I need to understand what it was that went wrong for these demon-worshippers. I keep seeing that woman turn Walters inside out and then scream as her own body melted. I'm not quite sure, but I'd almost swear it was in response to what she did to Walters. If I can find out what force caused this, then isolate it and manipulate it, I may yet have a way to defeat these monsters.

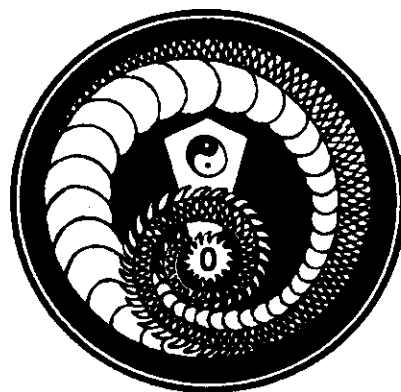
Aliens Among Us

Top Secret: File # 1251-A

There is no longer any doubt that extraterrestrial entities are wandering across the Earth. Just what their intention is, I don't know, but we will watch them as they are likely watching us, and when the time is right, I will decide what we must do. The victims of the Black Rain were unsettling, and in the long run, they proved to be dangerous. I only hope we located them soon enough to stop their seed from spreading any further.

I keep hearing reports of the Men in Black showing up in tandem with Strike Force Zero. There can be little doubt that these creatures are alien. The pictures I've seen of them — with their strange, emotionless faces — convince me of that.

Yoshi and his crazy ideas. He thinks these MiBs are coming over here from the United States. I think my sources would have told me if that were the case. Yoshi is a good man, but his ideas are a bit radical.





CHAPTER THREE: CHARACTER CREATION

It can't be emphasized enough that demon hunters are mortal. They aren't mages (with some exceptions) or even Kinfolk. They're simply humans driven to extremes by the course they've chosen to follow in their lives. However, they are also dedicated to one task, and they're trained to deal with the *shen* better than any humans elsewhere. The Shih, in particular, have spent over a decade perfecting their art and strengthening their bodies for combat against the demons. In comparison to the average human, they're pretty damn tough.

This section outlines how to build a demon hunter. The rules that apply for all of the Storyteller books do so here as well, including the fact that the Storyteller has final say as to whether or not a character is acceptable within her chronicle.

This chapter is broken into three parts. First, we provide the general rules of character creation. The final two sections examine the special abilities unique to Shih and Strike Force Zero, respectively.

THE BASICS OF CHARACTER CREATION

CONCEPT

Before creating your character, you should have some idea of where your character has been before. Was he a professional computer programmer, or a doctor whose family was killed by a rampaging werewolf? Was she orphaned by

a vampire's thirst for Chi? How long ago did he decide to dedicate his life to eradicating demons? Just how dedicated is she to the job? Does he have a family somewhere? Does she still love that special someone she abandoned to follow her path? These questions and others are important and should be answered before you begin. Why? Because they help you flesh out your character properly, and because your Storyteller might want to incorporate elements from your character's past into the chronicle.

It's assumed that your character is finished with her training and ready to go. So who taught her, and how did she suffer along the way? Strike Force agents may actually have a relatively routine existence, as demon hunters go, but Shih sacrifice any semblance of a normal life once they've decided to walk the path of the Excellent Archer. Nine-to-five jobs interfere with training, and working the fields at the family farm is a lost cause. There's no such thing as a part-time Shih.

What does your character look like? Is she tall and beautiful? Is he stocky and scarred by the battle that destroyed his family? Looks may seem superficial, but they make a difference in how well a character is treated by those he meets. All of these factors should be fleshed out in your mind before you begin the process of building your character. That said, let's get to the meat of the subject.

STORYTELLER NOTES

Demon Hunter X is a supplement for **Kindred of the East**. Though it's designed for use with any of the Storyteller games, there is a certain bias to the rules presented here. Shih and Strike Force Zero characters don't have Rage or Avatars; there is no listing on their character sheets for Arcanoi or Arts and Realms. Moderate adjustments might be required to insert these characters into games using changelings, werewolves, wraiths or mages. Also note that Shih start off with better Attributes and Abilities than Strike Force Zero agents, which reflects the 15 years or more that the Shih dedicate to their training.

DEMON HUNTER CHARACTER CREATION

• STEP ONE: CHARACTER CONCEPT

Choose concept, type (Shih or SFO), Nature and Demeanor.

• STEP TWO: SELECT ATTRIBUTES

Prioritize your three categories: Physical, Social and Mental — (8/6/3) for Shih characters, (7/5/3) for Strike Force characters.

• STEP THREE: SELECT ABILITIES

Prioritize your three categories: Talents, Skills and Knowledges — (21/12/5) for Shih characters, (13/9/5) for Strike Force characters.

No Ability higher than 3 at this time, which means that Shih have to spend at least nine freebie points (three on Martial Arts, two each on the other three Abilities) to raise mandatory Abilities to minimum levels.

Note on Shih: All Shih have extensive knowledge of hand-to-hand combat and traditional melee weapons, and all Shih must have at least four dots in Occult, Melee, Martial Arts and Dodge, as well as at least two dots in Firearms and Survival. These are the minimum numbers; higher levels are strongly suggested. Additionally, *World of Darkness: Combat* is solidly recommended for anyone wishing to play a Shih; while not necessary, it does offer advanced combat techniques that could mean life or death for your character.

Note on Strike Force Zero: Each SFO agent has extensive knowledge in one of the five following fields:

- Cyber-rat: Computer, Enigmas, Linguistics, Science, Security
- Bombardier: Firearms, Instruction, Research, Science, Stealth, Subterfuge
- Assassin: Alertness, Athletics, Martial Arts, Medicine, Melee, Streetwise
- Pilot: Computer, Crafts (repairs), Dodge, Drive (3 minimum; adept with all cars and motorcycles), Firearms, Pilot
- Snoop: Computer, Enigmas, Investigation, Linguistics, Occult, Research

The areas listed under each field are the Abilities most recommended for each type of agent. While it might not be possible to have all of these, at least a rudimentary knowledge is recommended. Also, all Strike Force Zero agents must have at least one dot in each of the following: Brawl (or Martial Arts), Firearms, Leadership, Melee, Occult, and Subterfuge.

• STEP FOUR: CHOOSE BACKGROUNDS

- Shih: 3 dots; additionally, all Shih have 3 in Mentor.
- Strike Force Zero: 6 dots; additionally, all SFO agents have an automatic 3 in Backers.

• STEP FIVE: CHOOSE VIRTUES

As mortals, all demon hunters have one dot in the Virtues of Conscience, Self-Control and Courage and gain seven points to spend on Virtues. Virtues work as listed in *Vampire: The Masquerade*; furthermore, they are used when calculating usable Chi and resisting terror and horror (see p. 84).

• STEP SIX: CHOOSE CHI POWERS

The greatest difference between demon hunters and ordinary mortals is that demon hunters can tap into and use their Chi (albeit, in the case of Strike Force Zero, unknowingly). Shih follow special paths, called Qiao; Strike Force agents have special implants granting them powers, and a few have psychic abilities.

Shih begin the game with one dot in each of the following Qiao: Qiao of the Mo Kung, Qiao of the I Shen, Qiao of the Yu An. Each additional dot beyond these three costs ten freebie points.

SFO operatives begin the game with two implants. Each additional implant requires purchasing a dot in the Arsenal Background. The cost for each new dot of Arsenal is three freebie points or, if purchased with experience points, the current rating x 3.

• STEP SEVEN: CALCULATE HUMANITY AND WILLPOWER

Humanity = Conscience + Self-Control, Willpower = Courage

• STEP EIGHT: SPEND FREEBIE POINTS

- Shih: (21) Characters may purchase Qiao, Merits and Flaws, in addition to adding to Attributes and Abilities.
- Strike Force Zero: (15) Characters may purchase Numina, additional implants, Merits and Flaws, in addition to adding to Attributes and Abilities.

FREEBIE POINTS

Trait	Cost
Attribute	5 per dot
Ability	2 per dot
Background	1 per dot*
Qiao/Numina	10 per dot**
Virtue	2 per dot
Humanity	1 per dot
Willpower	1 per dot

* All Strike Force agents start the game with two cyberware or wetware implants. They may gain additional implants by purchasing the Arsenal Background. However, unlike other Backgrounds, the Arsenal Background costs three freebie points per dot.

** All Shih start off with one dot in each of the following Chi Powers: Qiao of the Mo Kung, Qiao of the I Shen, Qiao of the Yu An.

CONCEPT

Who were you before you took the path of the demon hunter? What drives you to continue your battle against the *shen*? Do you still have any ties to your past?

NATURE AND DEMEANOR

These Traits reflect your character's outlook on life. More details on these characteristics can be found in any of the core Storyteller books.

BACKGROUNDS

Demon hunters, Shih and SFO alike, have a unique lifestyle, which is reflected in their Backgrounds. Many new Backgrounds are available to demon hunters. The following are limitations that might be placed on the character, at the Storyteller's discretion.

- **Allies** — Few Shih have any allies. Their lifestyle is too extreme and dangerous.

- **Arsenal** — This Background is exclusive to Strike Force operatives. Each dot in the Arsenal Background gives the new agent an additional piece of cyberware or wetware, though these devices are acquired at the cost of the agent's Humanity. Few SFO agents have more than a 3 in Arsenal.

- **Backers** — Shih don't have backers, though they are known to charge fees to people who look like they have money to burn.

- **Equipment** — Shih are not known for having high technology on hand, although a few have managed to get their hands on assault rifles and hand grenades. Remember that most Shih aren't licensed to carry weapons, and packing assault rifles is a good way to end up doing hard labor in many parts of Asia. SFO agents are licensed to kill and legally allowed to carry lethal weapons just about anywhere. However, the Background of Arsenal is far more important to the average SFO agent.

- **Fame** — Few Shih live long enough to attain fame, and those who do are apt to change their names when entering a new area. (The *shen* aren't very fond of being killed by mortals; it goes against their perception of how life is supposed to work.) Fame is the worst fate a Strike Force agent could ever experience. Both types of demon hunters should avoid this Background.



• **Favors** — Most Shih are big on the concept of favors. The more people who owe them, the happier they are. It's very common practice for a Shih warrior to let the people he's saved from the *shen* know that he might require a favor in return someday. Strike Force agents are more likely to gather political favors than favors from the average person on the street.

• **Mentor** — All Shih start with a mentor. Whether or not that mentor lives very long is up to the Storyteller. Furthermore, once a Shih master has passed on his training, he no longer feels obligated to stay around where the student can find him easily. Tracking down a mentor might take months or even years.

• **Rank** — Rank doesn't exist for the Shih. All are considered equal. Rank can make a difference, however, for Strike Force operatives.

• **Resources** — Very few Shih have appreciable resources; most live hand to mouth. Strike Force agents should have at least Resources 2, to reflect their salary and the funds available to them from the agency. Those without this Background are probably lousy at holding onto their money.

NEW BACKGROUNDS

Demon hunters can acquire several Backgrounds which, due to their nature, simply don't apply to most of the Storyteller games. While some of these Backgrounds have appeared before, we present them here, either with slight alterations or as a matter of convenience.

ARSENAL (STRIKE FORCE ZERO AGENTS ONLY)

Strike Force Zero agents have access to wetware and cyberware implants that can enhance their physical prowess, their senses, their physical and mental defenses, and their ability to cause injury. These devices are virtually indestructible and attuned to the agent in whom they are implanted. They are surgically implanted, which renders them more concealable than other tools and much harder to remove from the agent (extracting them requires surgery, voluntary or not).

Unlike other Backgrounds, each dot in Arsenal costs three freebie points. Moreover, Arsenal may not be purchased with "regular" Background dots, but must be bought with freebies. However, each SFO agent starts with two



implants in her arsenal, and they do not affect the modifiers for additional implanted devices. There is no limit to the number of implants an agent can have, except the agent's initial Humanity, but each must be paid for in advance. Shih cannot have this Background; it is available only to Strike Force Zero agents.

The human body and mind are not designed to accommodate "foreign" substances. SFO can handle their first two (automatic) implants with few ill effects. Each additional implant permanently reduces the agent's Humanity rating by one, though Humanity may be raised with freebie or experience points.

- one additional device
- two additional devices
- three additional devices
- four additional devices
- five additional devices

BACKERS

All SFO operatives have this Background. In essence, Backers detail how much financial assistance the agent can muster to pay bribes, purchase weapons, and extract herself from political hot water. While this Background is useful, it won't automatically remove obstacles. It might still take a week for an agent held in a Vietnamese prison to be released, and that's only if the local law-enforcement agency has bothered with proper protocol and notified the Japanese government that one of its agents is behind bars. Please note that while all SFO agents are licensed to kill, they must still be able to explain their actions to local law enforcement.

- Allowance of 200 yen per day for bribery and minor political sway (can avoid paying traffic fines).
- Allowance of 400 yen per day for bribery and can avoid being arrested for anything less than a felony charge. Licensed to carry a firearm.
- Allowance of 600 yen per day for bribery and can avoid being arrested on any charge less than a violent felony. Licensed to carry a concealed firearm.
- Allowance of 800 yen per day and can avoid being arrested for anything short of espionage. Licensed to assist local law enforcement in emergency situations.
- Allowance of 1,000 yen per day and can call on local law enforcement for backup, or can take command of local law enforcement in emergency situations; has the equivalent of diplomatic immunity in most allied nations.

EQUIPMENT

SFO agents have access to high-tech equipment. This Background indicates just how quickly an agent can get what he wants, and how much red tape he can avoid in the process. Note that this Background is sometimes given to agents on a temporary basis if their current assignment is top priority.

- Can get special equipment within one day, but must fill out all of the required forms.
- Can get special equipment in a matter of hours, but still must fill out all of the required forms.
- Can get special equipment in one day, no forms required.
- Can get special equipment within two hours, no forms required.
- The folks in the lab drop everything else to accommodate the agent's wishes.

FAVORS

Both Shih and Strike Force Zero often gather favors. This Background reflects the number of individuals disposed to aid the character as a result of past deeds. These individuals might be shop owners, informants, politicians or underworld figures, but each of them owes the character in a big way. Disposing of bodies, planting evidence, and even murder are possible through the use of favors. However, each favor is usable only once, after which it is considered null and void. It's possible to gain more favors during the course of play, but the final decision is in the hands of the Storyteller, as is the decision of when and how a favor is returned.

The giving and receiving of favors is intrinsic to certain Asian societies (as with Chinese society and its elaborate network of *guanxi*). Storytellers are encouraged to give automatic dots in this Background should characters earn them in play, and likewise should have no qualms about having a Storyteller character call in favors owed by the player characters....

- one favor
- two favors
- three favors
- four favors
- five favors

MENTOR

All Shih start with an automatic 3 in this Background, but that rating reflects that their teacher is still around and can be reached for assistance or information. It might take weeks to locate the character's mentor, but it can still be done.



- The character's instructor is occasionally available for advice.
- The character's instructor still assists the character in learning new skills.
- The character's instructor actively guides the character's continuing education.
- The character's instructor assists the character in times of need.
- The character's instructor watches out for the character and might even come to the rescue if the situation is dire enough. Also, the mentor is fond enough of the character to keep him informed of potentially dangerous situations.

RANK

Every Strike Force field agent has official rank in the military. However, having rank and being able to use it are entirely different. This Background reflects how well accepted the rank of the agent is, in addition to how high in rank the agent has risen. Unless the agent has this Background, he is considered a low-ranking officer.

- Second lieutenant; tolerated but seldom obeyed when not physically present.

- First lieutenant; obeyed only when there's no immediate rush to do what must be done.
- Captain; obeyed immediately.
- Major; obeyed and respected. Few argue with you.
- Colonel; even preposterous demands are immediately complied with.

VIRTUES

As humans, all demon hunters have the Virtues of Conscience, Self-Control and Courage, as well as the Traits of Humanity and Willpower. These Traits are generated per the rules in *Vampire: The Masquerade* — i.e., each hunter has one dot in each Virtue and can spend seven points on Virtues. A demon hunter's beginning Humanity equals Conscience + Self-Control, while beginning Willpower equals Courage. Though humans do not suffer from the frenzies and fears that grip Kindred and Kuei-jin, these Traits are still of paramount importance to demon hunters. Self-Control governs the character's use of Yin Chi, while Courage governs Yang Chi. Additionally, the Virtues are used to resist terror, horror, and degeneration.

CHI

The primary difference between demon hunters and other mortals is the demon hunters' ability to access their Chi. This elemental force is the building block of everything in the universe, including the flesh of humans and the searing heat at the center of a lightning bolt. Chi permeates the air we breathe, the water we drink and the sunlight that spills from the heavens.

Chi is life. Every microbe, every plant, animal, human, demon and deity is a byproduct of this force. Chi has at least a thousand different names, but none of them defines the concept completely. It's enough to understand that Chi is everywhere, all the time.

So why is it so precious? Why do the *shen* fight for it, why do they steal it from humans and glut themselves on it when they feel the need? Because Chi is power. Power and life are one and the same in the eyes of the Kuei-jin, the mages, the *hengeyokai*.

Chi is the basis of all life, and all supernatural life as well. Most living things can't access Chi, except on an unconscious level. Certain Shih scholars believe evolution occurs when a species realizes it needs to change and alters its own Chi unconsciously to handle the situation. Those species that can't make the necessary changes eventually fade from existence.

Mages and healers can access Chi, though in different ways. Mages access the world's ambient Chi in order to create miraculous results. Healers cannot actually use Chi, but they can help it move to the right places. A healer can speed the reknitting of bone or force cancer into remission by convincing a patient's Chi to do what it should be doing already. In this way, the healer can also work miracles.

But mages and healers typically don't deal with their own life-force; they deal with external Chi or the Chi of their patients. They don't focus their own spiritual energies to create drastic changes in themselves or in those around them. If they did, they'd suffer the same risks as the Shih and Strike Force agents. In contrast to other human Chi-wielders, demon hunters access their own life-force, or "bioenergy," in order to power their weapons or combat demons. And in doing so, they sacrifice a part of their own spirit, knowingly or not.

TYPES OF CHI

There are two types of Chi: Yin Chi, reflecting the passive, receptive, negative energy; and Yang Chi, embodying the active, energetic, positive life principles. All humans bear both in some measure.



SPENDING CHI

Every mortal has 10 Chi points. Ideally, five Yin and five Yang exist in each human, though this is seldom the case. Chi changes as the life of the person changes. A calm, depressed, serene or fatalistic person probably bears more Yin Chi, while a joyous, violent, enraged or "fired-up" person likely bears more Yang.

Most mortals have no way to access their Chi and thus are unaware of the true power they possess. Certain traumatic events can force a person to influence the energy unconsciously — for example, forcing cancer into remission; performing physically impossible tasks, like lifting a car off an injured child; or even beating the snout out of a werewolf. But the cost for these actions is often devastating. The muscles that lift the car are torn and the bones of the back broken by the impossible weight. The person who beats the werewolf is turned into a comatose vegetable, unable to die himself from the injuries sustained and the amount of Chi spent to achieve the victory. The person who beats her cancer under duress could be frail for months afterward. The reason in all of these cases is the same; just as the person does not know how to spend Chi consciously, so regaining life-force is beyond the average mortal's ability.

Shih and SFO operatives are exceptions to this rule. Shih, through years of practice, have the capacity to access their Chi. They can harness this power, use it in a variety of ways and, most importantly, regain it swiftly. Strike Force operatives use implanted devices that feed on their bioenergy: in other words, their Chi. Demon hunters' Chi reservoirs are in no way equal to those of their supernatural foes, and most hunters find their reserves exhausted after even a brief encounter. Both types of demon hunters, though, have ways to replenish their lost energies.

Shih spend their Chi through rituals they've learned and developed over the centuries. These rituals, called "Qiao" or "Bridges" by the demon hunters, are rigorous mental disciplines requiring years of training and meditation. Each Qiao uses either Yin or Yang Chi (in some rare cases, both) and often uses Willpower as the catalyst for the expenditure of energy. Unlike the Kuei-jin, the energy the Shih employ is their own, not stolen or borrowed from another. As a result, these powerful rituals are used sparingly. It is entirely possible to kill oneself by burning away too much life-force.

SFO agents also use Chi, but in an entirely different fashion. The wetware and biotechnology implanted in their bodies require a certain amount of the agents' life-force to remain empowered. One of the reasons for this is that the weapons are better hidden without an outside power source. But another factor, almost as important, is that the use of bioenergy stops the devices from being abused by the users. It's a built-in safeguard against betrayal. Each and every weapon and instrument within a Strike Force agent's body is personalized, working only for the particular agent to which it is attuned. This factor becomes very important if its agent is mentally controlled or possessed by a demon; possessed

entities suffer changes to their bioelectrical field, which means an agent possessed by a demon cannot turn his weaponry on his erstwhile teammates.

SFO operatives use their Chi just as surely as Shih do, but they are unaware of just what it is they do. The demon hunters do something to themselves when they begin using their Chi; they awaken energy in their bodies that wasn't intended to be awakened. They become more, or possibly less, than human. Once Chi energy is activated, consciously with the Shih or unconsciously with the Strike Force agents, a change takes place within the mortal wielders: Their bodies remain the same, at least in most ways, but their spirits are altered. They have a potential for greatness that is unrealized by most mortals, and they have a greater chance for damnation.

CHI RESERVOIRS

As previously stated, most human beings have 10 Chi. However, even the best trained Shih can't gain full access to their Chi. Just as with the Kuei-jin, they can use only certain amounts of their Chi, depending on their Virtues. Courage is the controller of Yang, and Self-Control is the controller of Yin. A demon hunter can evoke only as much Chi as her Self-Control Virtue allows for. In order to access all 10 points of Chi, a demon hunter has to have a 5 Self-Control and a 5 Courage.

A Shih warrior with a 3 Self-Control and a 4 Courage can access and expend as much as 3 Yin Chi and 4 Yang Chi. Though the warrior in question would literally risk death to accomplish this. Burning seven Chi in combat is the equivalent of losing seven pints of blood. The Shih would be exhausted that his body would shut itself down, leaving him in a coma or dead from heart failure. Accordingly, for every two Chi points spent reduce the character's Health by one.

When in a Stamina roll (difficulty 9) to access Chi in excess of her Virtue ratings. Such a roll enables additional Chi to be pulled from the character's life-force. This is extraordinarily dangerous, however; every point of Chi thus evoked costs the character a Health point, and the character must make an immediate Conscience roll (difficulty 8) to see if she loses Humanity.

REGAINING CHI

Spending Chi is easy, but regaining life-force is a bit harder. The most effective way to regain this lost energy is to rest, often meditating to enhance the effects. For each hour spent resting — that means actually resting, not studying important papers or trying to decipher an encrypted code — the character regains one point of Chi automatically. This Chi point goes to whichever Chi Pool is lowest in its current rating; if a Shih spent only one Yin Chi but also spent three Yang Chi, then the returning energy is converted into Yang Chi. The body recovers what is most important first. This is

automatic and can't be controlled by the character. Health Levels lost through Chi expenditure — not through wounds and the like — are restored through this process. Health Levels lost through expending Chi in excess of the character's Virtues are not recovered in this fashion; they must be healed normally.

Shih can double their normal rate of recovery by meditating, thus giving their bodies a better chance to regain what was lost. All that is required is a Stamina + Meditation roll (difficulty 6). Even one success means that the character regains Chi at twice the normal speed. This option is available to SF0 agents as well, but it requires two or more successes, as they haven't been formally trained in this particular form of meditation. As with rest, meditation works only if the character isn't trying to do several other things at the same time.

The only other natural way to regain Chi is to excel at what comes naturally for the character. Any time a character lives up to her Nature or concept fully and completely — enhancing the story and fun for everyone in the process — the Storyteller can call for that player to make a Conscience roll (difficulty 6). Each success restores one Chi point, which goes to the Yin or Yang Pool as needed. If, for example, a Strike Team agent succeeds in besting his rival in a particularly spectacular fashion, the Storyteller might decide to reward that success with a Conscience roll and the restoration of Chi. By living as the character is *meant* to live, that character is rewarded, but only at the Storyteller's discretion, which is by no means a sure bet for recovering spent Chi.

HUMANITY

Humanity, for demon hunters, is a measure of everything left in a human soul that can still measure moments of happiness and see them as more than equal time-shares of misery. It's the part of the human being that believes in the quality of mercy, and one that separates the demon hunters from the cold-blooded murderers.

Every demon hunter has a conscience, and whether or not they like to admit it, even SF0 agents acknowledge that everything exists for a reason. Killing a monster simply for looking different is the best way in the world to lose Humanity, and instinct often warns hunters against this action, even if "civilized" life fails to reinforce the belief.

Simple rules to remember: Killing monsters is still killing, and all the rationalization in the world means nothing to the Hun and P'o. The thought is as important as the deed in cases of Humanity.

The chart listed in **Vampire: The Masquerade** reflects the losses of Humanity well enough, but consideration of these factors is doubly important where humans are concerned. Humans can never completely lose their Humanity, but they can lose most of it, and at that time, they can awaken the P'o side of their nature.

Accordingly, every time a demon hunter commits a particularly ignominious act as a result of botching a Courage or Self-Control roll, she must make a Conscience roll. If she fails, she loses a point of Humanity. If she botches, she not only loses a point of Humanity, but she gains a point of P'o (as the **Kindred of the East** Trait). This P'o cannot be actively used by the character; it is merely a means of quantifying the character's "dark side." Characters with P'o scores are much more susceptible to certain Kuei-jin powers. Moreover, each time the character makes a Virtue or Humanity roll, the Storyteller can roll a number of dice equal to the P'o rating (difficulty 6); each P'o success subtracts one success from the character's Virtue/Humanity roll.

Once gained, P'o is permanent, though it may be bought off at the cost of 10 experience points per point removed. Each point of P'o reduces the maximum Humanity rating (i.e., a person with a P'o of 2 can have a maximum Humanity of 8). A character who dies with a P'o score of 3 or greater runs a strong risk of returning as one of the Hungry Dead.

In the world of **Demon Hunter X**, the possibility of becoming the very thing you've fought against is ever-present. And unless you play the game of life by the rules, there are always other demon hunters waiting to find you and show you the error of your ways.

A SUMMARY OF THE RULES

Self-Control = Yin Rating

Courage = Yang Rating

Conscience = Hun Rating

Committing an evil act and subsequently failing a Conscience roll causes the character to lose a point of Humanity. Botching a Conscience roll or dropping to Humanity 1 gives the demon hunter a point of P'o automatically.

At the time of death, if the demon hunter's P'o rating is greater than his Hun (Conscience) rating, he returns as a Kuei-jin, Bane or Spectre.

Every two Chi points spent reduces the character's Health Levels by one.

The character may spend Chi equal to her Yin (Self-Control) rating and her Yang (Courage) rating, per scene. Note: Spending too much Chi can be fatal.

Extra Chi can be accessed by making a Stamina roll (difficulty 9). However, this costs one Health Level per point accessed and requires the character to make a Conscience roll (difficulty 8) to avoid losing Humanity.

Every hour spent resting permits the recovery of one Chi point. During this time the character may do nothing but rest. Meditation doubles this recovery rate.

Neither Shih nor SF0 agents are automatically immune to the Chi-draining effects of the Kuei-jin. Each Chi point drained by a Kuei-jin reduces the character's usable Chi Pool by one.

WILLPOWER

Willpower is determined per the character's Courage rating, but it must be increased to a minimum of 5, either through raising the Courage rating or with freebie points. Not just anybody can become a demon hunter.

EXPERIENCE CHART

Trait	Cost
New Ability	3
New Qiao/Numina	10
Removing P'o	10/point
Arsenal Background	current rating x 3
Attribute	current rating x 5
Ability	current rating x 2
Virtue	current rating x 2
Humanity	current rating x 2
Willpower	current rating x 2
Qiao/Numina	current rating x 8

Raising a Virtue raises the maximum usable Chi Pool.

SPECIAL POWERS OF THE SHIH

The Shih have developed many unique powers over the centuries. First, we present the Qiao, or Bridges: ancient arts through which demon hunters focus their Chi to perform superhuman feats. We then present the special combat maneuvers of Mo Chi Kung Fu, which can be learned by all Shih with sufficiently high ratings in the Skill of Martial Arts.

QIAO

Shih channel their Chi through these arts. Each Qiao affects a different aspect of the person's life-force and uses either Yin or Yang Chi. Each level of a Qiao is referred to as a step, and there are five steps to each Qiao. Qiao cost 10 freebie points to acquire or improve, and improving them via experience costs the current rating x 8. Only Shih may purchase Qiao.

The Qiao are as follows:

- **Qiao of the I Shen (Celestial Gods)** — The spiritual belief of the Shih works as a powerful tool in the fight against the *shen*.
- **Qiao of the Mo Kung (Devil Fighter)** — The physical prowess of the Shih is increased with this special mental discipline.

- **Qiao of the Yu An (Jade Harmony)** — The mind of the Shih is given special protection against the mind-tricks of the *shen*.

- **Qiao of the Feng (Phoenix)** — The body of the Shih recovers swiftly from wounds and disease.

- **Qiao of the Shi (Serpent)** — The body of the Shih becomes a powerful weapon.

- **Qiao of the Chien (Mirror)** — A very traditional method of hunting demons, the Qiao of the Chien specializes in fighting fire with fire. Used properly, this Qiao allows Shih to trap the Chi of the *shen*. Chi thus stolen can be focused through a weapon of some sort, but a metallic, eight-sided mirror is the most traditional focus.

- **Qiao of the Long Ling (Dragon Ruler)** — A powerful psychological tool, this bridge lets the Shih use force of will in a mental battle with the *shen*.

- **Qiao of the Meng (Dream)** — Through the use of these steps, Shih can recover from the mental tortures they endure.

- **Qiao of the Zhu Mao (Resilient Cat)** — Employing the steps of this bridge, the Shih perform miracles of mind over matter.

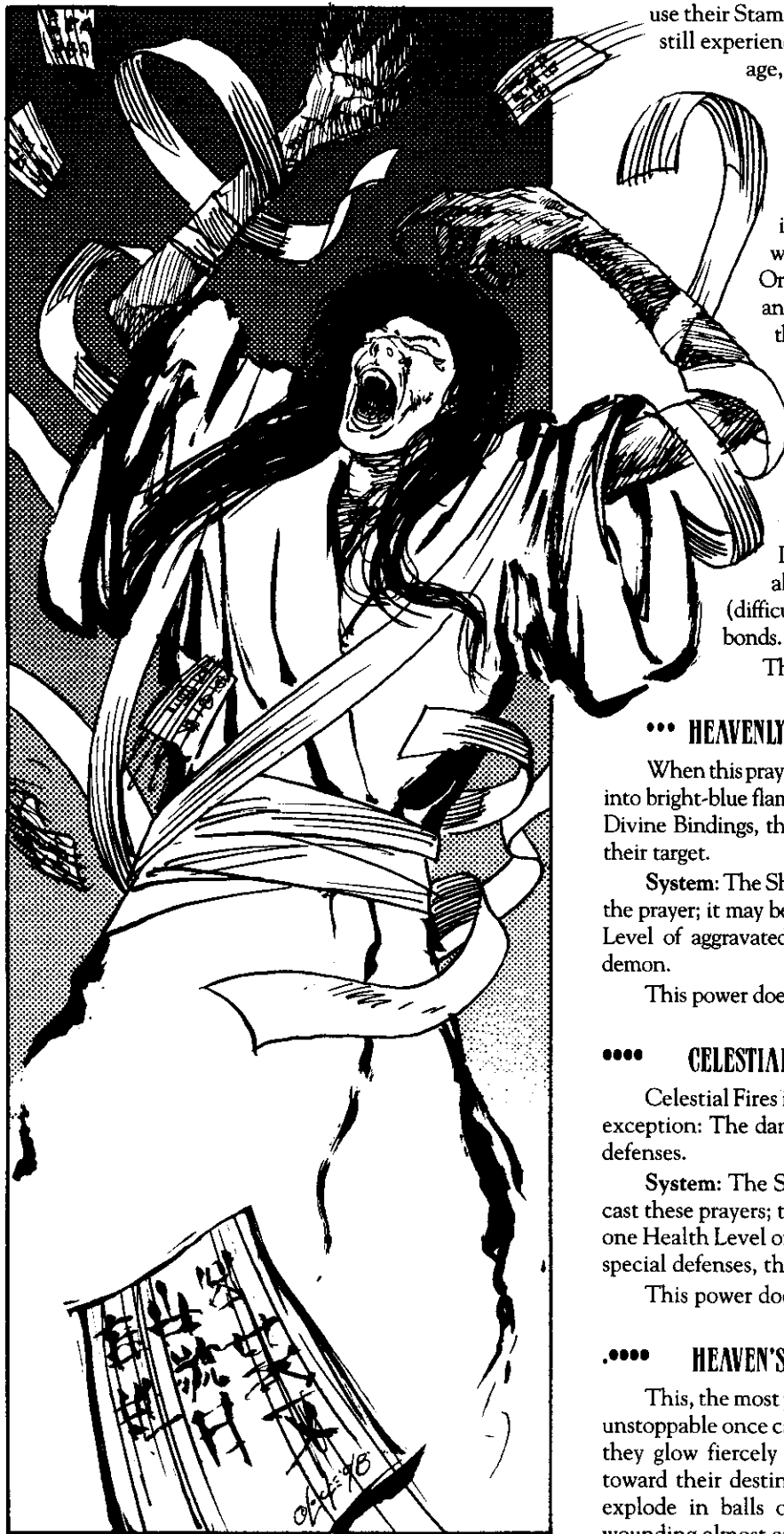
QIAO OF THE I SHEN

The Bridge of the Celestial Gods uses Yang Chi and requires very little effort on the part of the Shih. This Qiao focuses the Shih's belief and is a method for using prayer as a weapon. A Shih employing this Qiao actually inscribes mystic prayers on paper, and these work to hinder the *shen* or cause their destruction. Prayers may be prepared hours before a combat (their magic lasts for an entire day), but when they are created, they require an expenditure of Yang Chi. The only range restriction on these prayers is that a Shih must be able to see her target. Unless otherwise stated, the cost for making these prayers is one Yang Chi, and inscription of the prayers takes 15 minutes per step of the Qiao. These prayers may affect wraiths, spirits and other incorporeal beings.

CELESTIAL PUNISHMENT

These prayers work as a warning to the *shen*. When they strike their target, they ignite, causing no physical damage but burning the P'o of the target. These paper prayers are as effective as thrown knives and resist even the strongest natural winds while on route to their target.

System: The Shih spends a point of Yang Chi and 15 minutes to inscribe the prayers, then casts them at her target (using a Dexterity + Occult roll; the demon can dodge the attack normally, and the Shih suffers standard firearms penalties for range). For most demons, being struck by the prayers causes only extreme pain, which fades in moments. Wraiths and vampires (Kindred and Kuei-jin), however, suffer one Health Level of aggravated damage. Vampires may



use their Stamina to soak this damage, though they will still experience pain. Wraiths may not soak this damage, though appropriate Arcanoi can be used as a defense.

•• DIVINE BINDINGS

When cast toward a *shen* target, these innocuous sheets of paper move against the wind and even circumvent obstacles to strike. Once the prayers hit the target, they glow with an eerie green energy and expand, becoming thicker and longer as they wrap themselves around the *shen*.

System: The Shih rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 6) to cast these prayers, and they may be dodged. These bindings cause the *shen* a great deal of pain; an entrapped *shen* must make a Willpower roll (difficulty 7) in order to use any mental Disciplines, powers or abilities. Additionally, the *shen* must make a Strength roll (difficulty 6, 10 cumulative successes) to break the bonds.

This power does not affect incorporeal beings.

••• HEAVENLY FLAMES

When this prayer strikes a target *shen*, it immediately bursts into bright-blue flames that cause aggravated damage. As with Divine Bindings, the prayer moves around obstacles to reach their target.

System: The Shih rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 6) to cast the prayer; it may be dodged. Each success inflicts one Health Level of aggravated damage, which may be soaked by the demon.

This power does not affect incorporeal beings.

•••• CELESTIAL FIRES

Celestial Fires is identical to Heavenly Flames, with one exception: The damage may not be soaked without special defenses.

System: The Shih rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 7) to cast these prayers; they may be dodged. Each success inflicts one Health Level of aggravated damage. Unless the *shen* has special defenses, this damage may not be soaked.

This power does not affect incorporeal beings.

••••• HEAVEN'S THUNDER

This, the most powerful of the Shih's prayers, is virtually unstoppable once cast. As the prayers leave the Shih's hand, they glow fiercely and move with the speed of lightning toward their destination. When they strike the *shen*, they explode in balls of electrical fury capable of grievously wounding almost any demon.

System: The Shih rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 8) to cast these prayers and must spend two Yang Chi. There is no defense against this attack, and each success inflicts two Health Levels of aggravated damage. Using this prayer inflicts one Health Level of damage on the Shih, which cannot be soaked.

These prayers may affect spirits and incorporeal beings.

QIAO OF THE MO KUNG

The Bridge of the Devil Fighter is a potent but exhausting technique. The demon hunter accesses his own life-force to do battle with supernatural enemies.

• STEEL SKIN

The Shih increases her Stamina by use of this power.

System: The Shih rolls Stamina + Meditation (difficulty 8). Each success increases the character's Stamina by one, to a maximum of 8. The character must expend one Yang Chi. This increase lasts for the duration of the scene.

•• DRAGON'S SPEED

The Shih increases her Dexterity with this power.

System: The character rolls Dexterity + Meditation (difficulty 8) to employ this ability. Each success increases the character's Dexterity by one, to a maximum of 8. The character must expend one Yang Chi. This increase lasts for the duration of the scene.

••• TIGER'S STRENGTH

The Shih using this ability increases her Strength in preparation for combat.

System: The Shih rolls Strength + Meditation (difficulty 8) to use this ability. Each success increases the Shih's Strength by one, to a maximum of 8. The character must expend one Yang Chi. This increase lasts for the duration of the scene.

•••• CELESTIAL EYES

The Shih increases her Perception using this level of the Mo Kung Qiao.

System: The character rolls Willpower (difficulty 7) to use this power. Each success increases her Perception Attribute by one, to a maximum of 8. The character must spend one Yang Chi. This increase lasts for the duration of the scene.

••••• BODY OF THE DRAGON

The Shih increases all of his Attributes to superhuman levels.

System: The Shih expends two Willpower and two Yang Chi in addition to making a Willpower roll (difficulty 8). Each success increases all of the Shih's Attributes by one, to a maximum of 9. This increase lasts for the duration of the combat, which is extremely draining and potentially dangerous for the character. When the battle is finished, the character must rest for several hours before he can do more than walk a few yards.

QIAO OF THE YU AN

The Bridge of the Jade Harmony enables Shih to resist the powerful "mind tricks" of the *shen*. To utilize this Qiao, a Shih must carry jade on her person as a focus for the spirit and mind.

• OPENED EYES

The Shih can see the *shen* for what they are. The Shih can also ignore the effects of the Delirium.

System: This step costs one Yang Chi and lasts for one scene. The character can see wraiths, can detect *hsien* for what they are, and can even notice the *hengeyokai* in their mortal forms. The creatures that seek to hide their true forms from the Shih are no longer capable of doing so. This step does not aid against beings using magic actively to shroud themselves or change their shape.

•• DIVINE PERCEPTIONS

This power entitles the Shih to view the spirit of another being. It works like a lie detector for the most part, but the Shih can also see when a mortal or other entity is possessed by a demon.

System: The Shih rolls Perception + Occult (difficulty 6) in order to employ this ability. Each success allows the character a greater level of understanding. With one success, the character can discern whether or not someone is lying. With two successes, the character can detect if someone is under the influence of another entity. With three or more successes, the character can determine if someone is possessed; with five or more successes, the character can actually make out the source of influences that alter another person's mind.

Use of this ability costs one Yang Chi and lasts for one scene.

••• WIND TALK

The Shih employing this ability can listen to the denizens of the spirit realms and communicate with them. These *shen* are not, however, obligated to respond to any questions or demands the Shih might make.

System: The Shih rolls Perception + Occult (difficulty 8) and spends one Chi (Yin or Yang, depending on the spirit world to which the Shih seeks to attune himself). Each success increases the hunter's ability to hear the voices of the



spirit realms. With one success, the character hears whispering noises and must concentrate to interpret those sounds. With two successes, the character can hear the sounds clearly if there is no background noise. With three successes, the character can hear the voices over any but the loudest noises; with four successes, the character can converse freely with the spirits, though she might have to move closer if the spirits are a good distance away. With five successes, the character can hear everything around her as if the spirits were standing beside her — which, in some cases, they are — and speaking in a normal voice. This ability lasts for one scene.

◆◆◆ CELESTIAL WINDOW

The Shih employing this ability interacts on all levels with one denizen of the Yin or Yang Realm. For all intents and purposes, the chosen spirit is on the same level of existence as the Shih. That spirit can be touched, hurt, helped or engaged in combat as if both the Shih and the spirit were in the same place.

System: The character rolls Perception + Occult (difficulty 7) in order to perform this task. The Shih expends one Yin Chi or one Yang Chi, depending on the realm in which the spirit dwells, in order to open this spiritual window. Should the *shen* flee from the hunter, the hunter can't follow. This ability lasts for one scene.

◆◆◆ CELESTIAL DOORWAY

The Shih can actively interact with the spirit worlds; however, this course of action is not necessarily the wisest to take. While the character actually remains in the Middle Kingdom, he can see and affect the Yin and Yang Worlds around him. Although, the denizens of those realms can return the favor, and many of them aren't fond of the Shih.

System: The Shih rolls Perception + Occult (difficulty 8) and spends one Yin and one Yang Chi. Once this "doorway" opens for the Shih, the *shen* in both spirit worlds are capable of complete interaction with the Shih, despite the hunter's remaining in the physical realms, which is seldom considered a very wise action on the part of the Shih as it often results in death. The Celestial Doorway lasts for one scene, or less if the Shih decides to close the door as quickly as possible.

QIAO OF THE FENG

The Bridge of the Phoenix is a simple, direct and passive art. By focusing Yin Chi, the Shih can heal wounds on her body by forcing them to close — damaged nerves and arteries knit themselves back together. The higher the step, the more effectively she can heal her wounds. The Shih is, in essence, rebuilding her body at the expense of her life-force. While

very draining and potentially fatal, the Qiao of the Feng is the only method most Shih have for enduring the tremendous damage they suffer during combat. In every case, this ability produces scar tissue.

Note that Chi spent to activate this power still reduces the character's Health Levels normally; the idea, though, is that the character heals her critical damage, then restores Chi-based damage through rest and meditation.

• BARRIER OF PAIN

The Shih can force herself to shut out pain at this level.

System: The Shih rolls Willpower (difficulty 6) in order to ignore any debilitating effects of damage. For each success, she can ignore one die of wound penalties. This ability costs one Yin Chi and lasts for the duration of the scene.

•• THE CLOSING WOUND

At this level, the Shih is able to heal wounds. Bruised flesh loses its tenderness; wounds knit themselves back together and leave fresh scars.

System: The Shih rolls Willpower (difficulty 7) in order to close and heal wounds. If successful, one Health Level of damage is regenerated; with three or more successes, two Health Levels are healed. This one doesn't work against broken bones, severed nerves or burnt flesh, but anything else can be healed. Further, the Shih can purge his body of impurities such as poisons and minor diseases at this level, though it may take a while. This ability costs one Yin Chi.

••• SPIRITUAL HEALING

The Shih can reknit bones and rebuild nerve tissue with this ability. This process is painful and often risky if used in a combat situation. The bones must be reset properly or the Shih risks crippling herself permanently.

System: The Shih rolls Willpower (difficulty 8). The Shih regenerates one Health Level of damage for each success. Bone and nerve tissue reweave into solid, functional material, though incorrectly set bones cause severe crippling until they are reset and healed again. This ability costs two Yin Chi and does not work against damage caused by fire, acid or other energy/Chi attacks.

•••• ESCAPE FROM DEATH

The Shih using this ability can regenerate even burns and other energy damage. While very useful, Escape from Death is also very costly.

System: The Shih rolls Intelligence + Occult (difficulty 8). For each success, the character recovers one Health Level of damage. This is a very painful, time-consuming process, and one Health Level of damage is regenerated per hour. If the character is disturbed (manhandled or attacked) during this time, the process ends and any remaining Health Levels

of damage remain unhealed. When the healing is underway, the character must eat copious amounts of food to replace the energy used in the process. This ability costs three Yin Chi.

••••• FLAMES OF THE PHOENIX

The character using this ability completely regenerates herself on a cellular level. This power can't bring a character back from the dead, but it reverses the effects of radiation poisoning, cancer, severe trauma and even old age. This reverse action is the most powerful use of the Qiao of the Feng, and it frequently leads to exhausting almost all of the Shih's life-force. Most Shih who are adept enough to understand the principles of the Flames of the Phoenix still hesitate to use them — the drain of life-force can kill immediately if performed incorrectly. On the bright side, they leave behind very healthy-looking corpses.

System: The Shih spends three Yang Chi, three Yin Chi, and two *permanent* Willpower points, then rolls Stamina + Occult (difficulty 9). Success allows the character to begin the day-long process of rebuilding himself from the ground up. Failure on the Stamina + Occult roll still costs all of the aforementioned, but nothing happens. Success indicates that the ill effects of aging, radiation, etc., are removed and the character goes through a complete bodily restoration. When done, the character will appear completely different. Scars fade and are replaced with new skin; bones alter subtly, changing the shape of the face and even the height of the character. Fingerprints change, even retinal structure is altered. The person is, in effect, reborn into a new body. Very few Shih ever use this ability, as they must be in nearly perfect health to even attempt it.

QIAO OF THE SHI

The Bridge of the Serpent permits the Shih to focus his Chi as a destructive force without the benefit of weapons.

• THOUSAND FISTS

The Shih focuses his Yang Chi and cuts loose with multiple punches. The strikes are superhuman-fast, often blurring in the air.

System: The Shih rolls Dexterity + Martial Arts (difficulty 7). Each success increases the the damage Dice Pool by one die. This ability costs one Yang Chi, and the character must still hit his target successfully. It lasts for one turn.

•• SPEAR HAND

The Shih focuses his Yang Chi and ignites the energy around one hand. This energy ripples the air and burns intensely.

System: The Shih rolls Strength + Martial Arts (difficulty 6) in order to make his attacks — with the one appendage — inflict aggravated damage. This ability costs one Yang Chi and lasts for the duration of the scene.

BURNING GHOSTS

The Shih knight focuses his Chi, allowing him to combat wraiths and spirits of all types. His skin glows with a golden light, and Chi energies wrap around him. The Shih's body doesn't actually strike the spirits, but the aura of power surrounding him does.

System: The Shih rolls Strength + Occult (difficulty 7) and spends one Yang Chi. Success enables the character to strike out against wraiths and spirits as if they were Embodied or Materialized. However, the wraiths and spirits cannot return the favor without Embodying or Materializing. This ability lasts for one scene.

STEEL BODY

The Shih focuses his Yin Chi, toughening his body and increasing his ability to inflict damage. Every muscle in the Shih's body tautens, and his skin becomes far more resilient.

System: The Shih spends two Yin Chi and rolls Willpower (difficulty 8). Each blow dealt causes aggravated damage, and it's not unusual for a Shih in this state to literally rip the heart out of an opponent. The character also gains two extra dice on all soak rolls while this power is in effect. This ability lasts for the duration of the scene.

THOUSAND SWORDS

The Shih concentrates his Chi, then lashes out against his enemies in a flurry of actions. Each strike opens wounds in his enemy, and the sound of the impacts is like that of metal striking metal.

System: The Shih rolls Strength + Occult (difficulty 8). Each success gives the Shih one additional attack per turn. All Martial Arts attacks used by a Shih in this state cause aggravated damage. This ability costs two Yin Chi and two Yang Chi to activate and lasts for the duration of the scene. Once the combat is over, the Shih must rest immediately. Until he rests, all Physical Attributes are reduced to 1.

QIAO OF THE CHIEN

The Bridge of the Mirror protects the Shih from the life-draining powers of the *shen*. More importantly, the Shih can actually steal Chi from the demon and use that Chi against her enemy. The Shih using this Qiao must choose a weapon through which to focus her Chi. Traditionalists use an eight-sided mirror made of metal, while others use a sword or token made from jade. While the Qiao of the Chien does use the Chi of demons, it requires the Chi of the demon hunter as well.

• FROZEN RIVER

The Shih uses her Yang Chi to build a protective barrier around her own life-force, thus preventing the theft of her Chi.

System: The Shih spends one Yang Chi and rolls Stamina + Occult (difficulty 6). For each success, all difficulties to steal her Chi increase by one.

•• STOLEN SERPENT

The Shih can capture any ranged supernatural attack directed against him and then send it hurtling back at the opponent who cast it. This is a dangerous business, as the Shih must demonstrate perfect timing in order to seize the mystical energies thrown at him.

System: The Shih spends one Yang Chi and rolls Dexterity + Occult (difficulty 8) in order to capture the attack sent toward him. One success is all that is needed, but failure means the character takes the full damage from the attack and cannot soak the damage. In order to return the attack, the Shih rolls Dexterity + Firearms with normal range penalties.

••• CELESTIAL BARRIER

With this power, the Shih temporarily blocks the *shen*'s ability to take Chi from other sources.

System: The Shih rolls Willpower (difficulty 8) and spends one Yang Chi. For each success, the target *shen* is prohibited from gaining Chi for one turn. The *shen* may attempt to block this attack with a resisted Willpower roll (difficulty 8).

•••• CLUTCH OF THE WAN KUEI

The Shih using this ability is able to steal Chi from a *shen*. While stolen Chi is no longer available to the *shen*, neither can the Shih use the stolen Chi. It is absorbed into the weapon used.

System: The Shih spends one Yang Chi and rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 8). For each success, the character steals one Chi from the target of his next successful attack.

••••• BITE OF THE MU

The Shih using this ability not only steals the Chi from a target *shen*, but also uses that Chi in an attack against the *shen*. The experience is often heady, sometimes even addictive, for the Shih. This procedure is a very risky one, for it awakens the Shih's P'o.

System: The Shih rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 8). Each success removes one Chi from the target *shen*. On the next successful attack, the collected Chi may be used to add aggravated damage (one die per Chi stolen) to the total

damage inflicted on the *shen*. The Shih spends two Yang Chi to activate this ability, and sacrifices one Humanity. This ability lasts for the duration of the combat.

QIAO OF THE LONG LING

The Bridge of the Dragon Ruler involves mental domination and intimidation. Much as with the *shen*, Shih developed these abilities to help them play "mind tricks" on their enemies. This Qiao uses both Yin and Yang Chi.

• EYES OF THE DRAGON

The Shih stares down an opponent. Intimidation is the key to avoiding combat successfully.

System: The character rolls Charisma + Intimidation (difficulty equal to the target's Willpower) and spends one Yin Chi. Success leaves the opponent too stunned to act for one turn.

•• DARK REFLECTION

This power forces the enemies of the Shih to realize the consequences of their actions. Shih use this power when pronouncing judgment on a *shen*.

System: The character rolls Willpower (difficulty of target's Willpower) and spends one Yin Chi. Each success reduces the target's initiative Dice Pool by one for the remainder of the scene, as the target is overwhelmed by memories of past atrocities committed.

••• HAUNTED EYES

This power works on Hungry Dead and Restless Dead alike. Staring into the eyes of an opponent, the Shih forces the target to relive any time spent in the Yomi World.

System: The Shih spends two Yin Chi and makes a Perception + Occult roll (difficulty 9). Success overwhelms the spirit or Kuei-jin with the worst memories of her existence. Most Kuei-jin enter wave soul, and in any event, the target cannot take any aggressive action. The target of this attack can resist with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8, must exceed the Shih's successes) and the power is nullified if the target is attacked. This is meant as a punishment and a reminder of why the *shen* is tormented.

•••• VOICE OF THE YAMA KINGS

A Shih employing this power can command one spirit to accomplish one simple task, which must be something the spirit can actually do, but need not be something the spirit would be willing to do normally.

System: The character rolls Charisma + Intimidation (difficulty 8) and spends one Yin and one Yang Chi. The command given must be simple and direct, such as ordering the spirit to leave the Middle Kingdom for one year. Spirits



cannot be ordered to harm themselves, but they can be sent to attack others. The commands must be carefully worded, as the spirit need only follow the letter of the orders, not their intent. The spirit may resist this power with a Willpower roll (difficulty 8).

••••• DIVINE ORDINANCE

The Shih inspires overwhelming fear in all opponents within visual range.

System: The Shih spends two Yang Chi and rolls Willpower (difficulty 7). Success inflicts an effect identical to the Delirium (see *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, p. 203). Most *shen* flee the area. This power lasts for one scene.

QIAO OF THE MENG

The Bridge of Dreams is employed by the Shih to aid in spiritual recovery. The violence and constant strain of hunting demons wear heavily on the minds of the Shih, but this Qiao aids in recovery and restores mental balance. This Bridge relies heavily on meditation.

• BALANCE OF THE SPIRIT

The Shih can discern the spiritual imbalances of Yin and Yang and attempt to restore proper order with this power.

System: The character rolls Perception + Occult (difficulty 9). Success means the character can interpret a target's internal Chi flow within and discover how to correct the imbalance. Methods of alteration include meditation (one day in meditation, without interruptions, corrects one point of Yin and Yang imbalance) and, in some cases, the use of herbs to alter the body's Chi.

•• FOCUS OF THE MIND

Shih use a great deal of their Willpower fighting against *shen*. This power lets them regain their resolve and once again perform their sacred duties.

System: The character spends one Yang Chi and rolls Perception + Meditation (difficulty 6). Each success restores one point of Willpower. The character must be in a state of relaxation to use this power.

••• NIGHTMARE EXORCISM

Many Shih turn to drugs and alcohol in an effort to alleviate their mental anguish. Shih using this power take a more direct approach by erasing the memory's emotional impact and, hopefully, removing the mental scars that memory creates.

System: The character rolls Wits + Meditation (difficulty 8) in order to isolate a particular event that is causing emotional stress. Once an event has been separated from the

remaining memories, the character rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 8) to exorcise the memory, thus removing that memory's power to cause pain. This power costs one Yang Chi. In the process, the character must relive that experience in vivid detail. A botch on the roll gives the character a new Derangement (Storyteller's choice); failure leaves the memory unaffected, and success removes the mental burdens brought forth by the recalled events. Four or more successes on this roll can remove an existing Derangement.

•••• SELF-EXORCISM

Shih, like all mortals, are subject to the risks of demonic possession. With this power, the demon hunter engages in psychic battle with a demon that has successfully managed to gain entry to her body, acquiring a second chance to expel the demon.

System: The character rolls Willpower (difficulty equal to demon's P'o or Rage) and spends two Yang Chi. Success means the demon's hold is weakened, but the demon can resist with a P'o or Rage roll (difficulty equal to character's Willpower). When one or the other of the combatants has gained 10 successes, the conflict is resolved.

••••• MENTAL DOMINION

A Shih using this power can fully restore her Willpower and actually weaken her P'o. This ability requires meditation and fasting.

System: The character spends one full week in meditation while preparing for the internal struggle. This week is spent reflecting on the sins the character has committed and the necessity of committing those acts. The character must fast and cannot participate in any other activities during this time. When this feat has been accomplished, the character rolls Wits + Occult (difficulty 9) and spends two Yin and two Yang Chi. Success means complete restoration of the character's Willpower. Every two successes reduce the character's P'o by one.

QIAO OF THE ZHU MAO

The Bridge of the Resilient Cat permits the Shih to use Chi for movement or defense.

• CLOUD WALKING

This power lets the Shih move silently and without leaving a trail, even while running. The Shih leaves behind no scent to indicate that he has ever been in the area.

System: The Shih rolls Willpower (difficulty 6) and spends one Yang Chi. Success means the character moves slightly off the ground, disturbing only the air with his passage. This power lasts for one scene.





•• WATER TREADING

With this power, the Shih is able to travel over unstable surfaces, such as water or quicksand, and to use virtually any surface, even leaves on a tree, for the purpose of climbing.

System: The character spends one Yang Chi; no roll is required. The character can safely walk on water or any unstable surface, even a heavy fog, and she can climb any surface. Any interference — attacks or blatant distractions — breaks the character's concentration and nullifies this power. Otherwise, it lasts for one scene.

••• WIND STRIKE

The Shih uses an opponent's own momentum to throw an enemy incredible distances.

System: The character must Throw an opponent per the Martial Arts rules in *Kindred of the East*. The character spends one Yang Chi and increases the target's velocity tenfold. Each success on the Throw sends the opponent an additional 20 feet and inflicts one Health Level of damage.

••• MOUNTAIN STANCE

The Shih absorbs the impact of an attack, redirecting the force into the ground.

System: The character takes a defensive action, rolls Stamina + Martial Arts (difficulty 7) and spends one Yang Chi. Success means that all Health Levels of damage aimed at the character are dispersed into the ground at the character's feet. While this is normally a safe method of resisting damage, the ground itself takes the impact. Standing on a wooden bridge or loose soil can have unpleasant side effects, as the ground beneath the character might dissolve or collapse.

•••• CELESTIAL WIND

The Shih using this power focuses his Chi to stop a target from advancing and possibly even sends an opponent crashing backward.

System: The character spends one Yang Chi and rolls Medicine + Occult (difficulty 8). Success means an approaching target — be it a car, a bullet or a *shen* — is halted immediately. Each success beyond the first sends the target of this power backward at a greater velocity (10 miles per hour, per success) and inflicts two Health Levels of damage should the opponent strike any obstacle.

COMBAT MANEUVERS OF THE SHIH (MO CHI KUNG FU)

The Shih have developed many special attacks over the years, most designed for combat against specific forms of *shen*. Though the Mo Chi Kung Fu (Devil Judgment) is hardly the only form of martial arts studied by the Shih, it is integral to their

survival. Even with years of training and a few special talents and abilities, it's always nice to have an edge over your enemies, especially when they could eat you for lunch if you get sloppy.

For each dot above the first in Martial Arts or Melee, the Shih may select one of these maneuvers. Thus, a character with a 5 in Martial Arts knows four special maneuvers. In all cases, the prerequisite for learning these maneuvers is a minimum 4 in Martial Arts. These attacks are exceedingly specialized and designed to work against particular types of foes — and they can be used for defense as well as offense. Certain attacks require a sword, a staff, or throwing darts. At the Storyteller's discretion, Shih characters might be permitted to purchase Do maneuvers (see **World of Darkness: Combat** and **The Akashic Brotherhood** for **Mage: The Ascension**). While the rules below are effective and designed to work against the supernatural forces of the Middle Kingdom, the players and Storyteller are still encouraged to look to **World of Darkness: Combat** for greater details on Shih hand-to-hand techniques.

SNOUT STRIKE

The shapeshifting hengeyokai all have sensitive spots, and for most of them — the mammalian ones at least — the snout is a weak point. The Shih learned this early on and have used it to their advantage when forced to do battle with a shapeshifter who is in animal or half-animal form. The Snout Strike is a short, vicious jab, or in some cases, a grab, to the muzzle. When executed properly, a Snout Strike targets the nerve ganglia of

the shapechanger, causing intense pain, severe watering of the eyes, and a weakness in the cognitive functions.

A successful strike inflicts normal damage for a martial-arts fist strike, but it also reduces the opponent's Dice Pool by two for one turn per success. A character can choose to keep the pressure on the sensitive area, but there's a serious risk: Continued pressure to the nerve ganglia can cause a hengeyokai to frenzy, at which point, the effects of the Snout Strike are ignored. This maneuver is most often used at the beginning of a conflict, to "even the odds."

Roll: Dex + Martial Arts

Difficulty: 8

Damage: Special

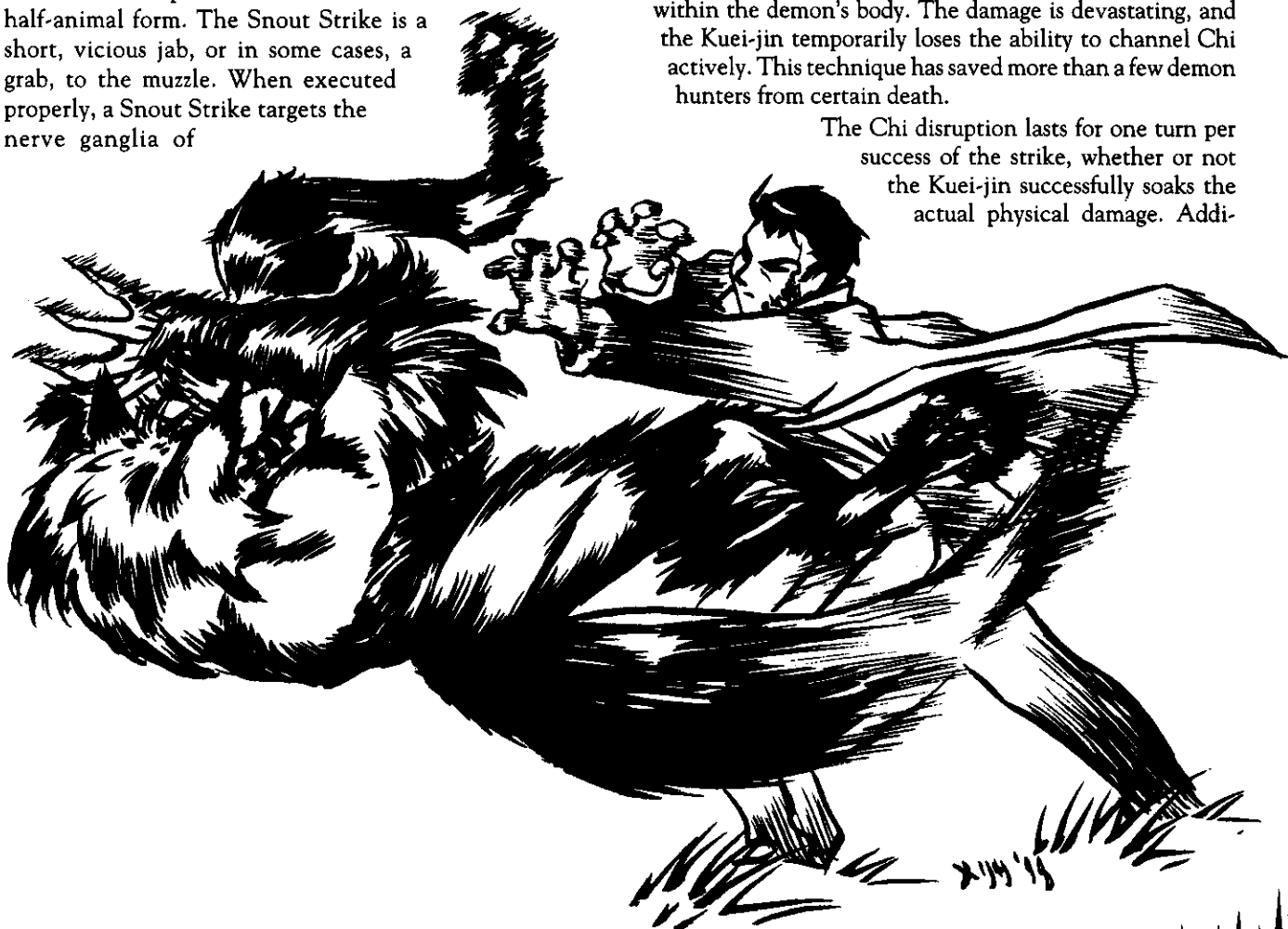
Actions: 1

CHI BREAKER

The Chi Breaker is used almost exclusively against the Kuei-jin and does exactly what it claims to do. Though the Cathayans have fewer areas of weakness than many *shen*, they do have to worry about their Chi. When this attack is performed successfully, the effects on the Kuei-jin are immediate and extremely unpleasant.

The Shih spends a point of Yin Chi and a point of Willpower when the strike is made. The Shih thrusts a hand into the Kuei-jin's torso and disrupts the natural flow of Chi within the demon's body. The damage is devastating, and the Kuei-jin temporarily loses the ability to channel Chi actively. This technique has saved more than a few demon hunters from certain death.

The Chi disruption lasts for one turn per success of the strike, whether or not the Kuei-jin successfully soaks the actual physical damage. Addi-



tionally, each success above the minimum number needed to hit the target adds one Health Level of damage to the attack.

Roll: Dex + Martial Arts

Difficulty: 8

Damage: Strength + 1 per success

Actions: 1

HUNDRED STAR SHOWER

The Hundred Star Shower requires the expenditure of two Yin Chi, and the Shih must have at least a dozen metal throwing stars or darts. The Shih charges the shuriken with her own life-force; the Chi-charged missiles don't look any different, but their impact is far greater than it would be under normal circumstances. Each dart thrown does its usual Strength +1 in damage, but the sacrificed life-force makes the damage aggravated. Kuei-jin may use Yin Mantle to soak this damage. Damage for each thrown dart must be rolled separately.

Roll: Dex + Firearms

Difficulty: 6

Damage: Str + 1 per dart

Actions: 2

JAW HAMMER

The Jaw Hammer is a powerful blow designed to shatter the bones in a target's jaw. Most hengeyokai, Kuei-jin and *hirayanu* use their teeth as lethal weapons. By breaking a *shen*'s jaw in the right manner, that weapon is removed from the target's arsenal. This attack is very difficult to execute correctly; furthermore, because of the unusual arm and hand contortions required to apply the proper force, the Shih leaves herself open to attack on the following turn. If this

attack fails, the Shih cannot dodge during the next turn.

Shih use this technique only if they're certain they can survive failing to do it. Three successes are required to actually shatter the bones in the jaw; this damage is normal but cannot be soaked. The jaw cannot be used for biting until all of the damage has been regenerated. With five or more successes, the damage is aggravated and the bone fragments must be set before they will heal correctly. A few *shen* walk around with oddly shaped jaws as a result of this attack.

Roll: Dex + Martial Arts

Difficulty: 8

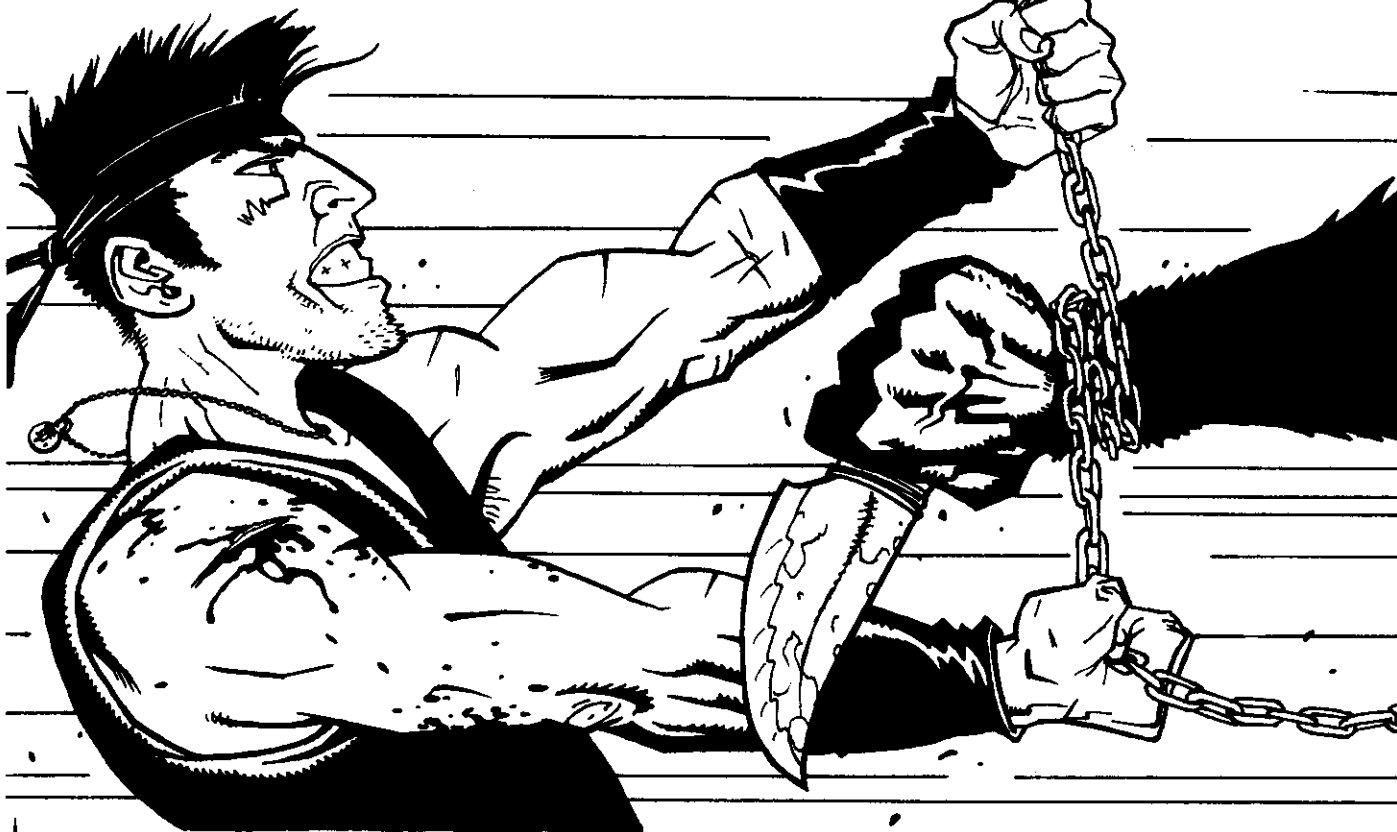
Damage: Str

Actions: 1

FADING LIGHT STRIKE

The Fading Light Strike is used to steal the power from an opponent. In the case of hengeyokai, Rage is taken, while in the case of the Kuei-jin, Chi is taken. This strike causes no physical damage, but the metaphysical effects can be devastating. This is yet another attack designed to balance the scales in combat. The Shih must use a weapon of some length — a sword or a staff — to execute it. The energy stolen from the demon could well be corrupted, and no Shih wants to risk infection.

The Shih must understand the anatomy of her enemy and also comprehend the nature of the power she seeks to remove. For these reasons, the Shih must have Medicine 3 and Occult 3, in addition to Martial Arts 4, in order to perform this maneuver. The Shih must also spend one Yang Chi upon successfully striking the correct part of her target's body.



Each success removes one Chi, Rage or Quintessence for the duration of the scene.

Roll: Dex + Melee **Difficulty:** 9
Damage: Weapon + Special **Actions:** 1

CHAIN SNAKE

The Chain Snake requires a strong rope, whip or chain to use properly. Many Shih carry a length of chain with weights at either end, a modified version of the *manriki-gusari*, with far heavier weights than usual. This chain, called a demon-braid by the hunters, is used for the Chain Snake maneuver and to cripple hengyokai and other enemies. Many antique chains are laced with silver, and Shih sometimes add their own silver by melting coins or stolen jewelry over the heads at either end of the chain.

Demon-braids do Strength +2 damage and have an effective range of 15 feet in an open battleground. The Chain Snake maneuver is used to block an opponent's attack while capturing the attacking limb. At the same time, one end of the chain is used to counterattack, often at the vitals or face.

The Chain Snake is a very useful attack, but it requires nerves of steel, as the attacking demon has an open target. Because of the intricate movement required to wield the chain, the character must remain an open target in order to perform the stratagem. If the maneuver is successfully executed, the Shih avoids an incoming strike, manages to snare one of the opponent's limbs — setting up that limb for a world of hurt in

the process — and strikes back at the opponent, all in one smooth-flowing action. A successful attack also gives the Shih an automatic +3 dice on initiative for the next turn.

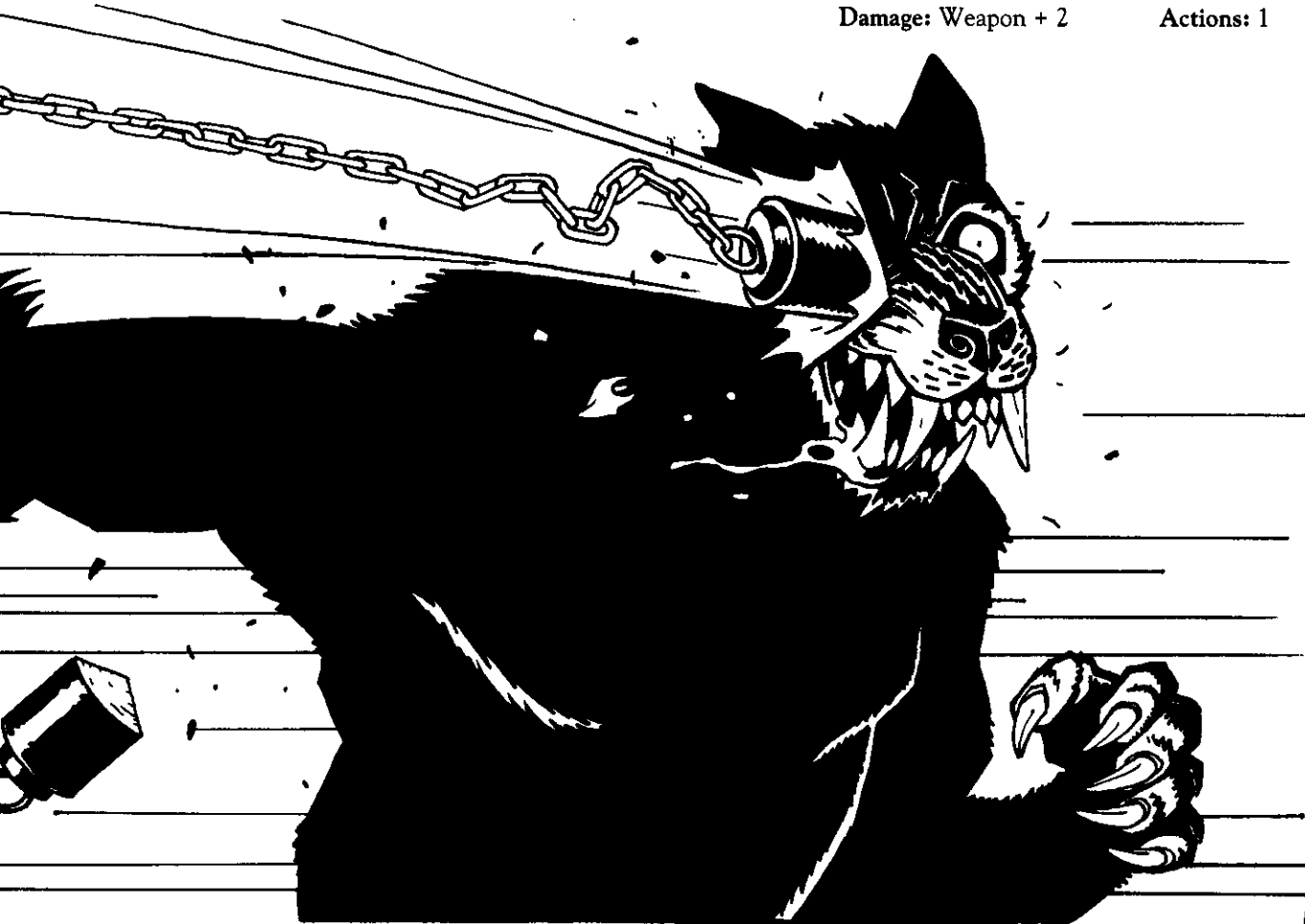
A captured limb gives the Shih an advantage in combat, as that limb can be moved or twisted to slow the attacker, allowing +2 dice for the purposes of avoiding the *shen*'s next attack. A failed attack, though, reduces enemies' difficulty to hit the Shih by two. While this move can be used with nunchaku and other short weapons, they can only capture the limb; they cannot be used to strike back at an enemy.

Roll: Dex + Melee **Difficulty:** 7
Damage: Weapon + Special **Actions:** 1

TWISTING THRUST

The Twisting Thrust maneuver permits a Shih warrior to cut deeply into an opponent's body, turning the blade of her weapon to inflict a great amount of damage. Once the damage is done, the Shih follows through with a hip-level throw to knock the opponent off balance, then she wrenches the weapon free. If performed successfully, all botched damage dice are ignored and rolled again (on the second roll, any "1s" stand and are counted as usual). Further, the target suffers the effect of a normal martial-arts Throw. The damage may be soaked, as usual, but the enemy is likely to end up on his back with a very large hole in some part of his body. The target must spend one action to stand back up, but prone attacks require no extra actions.

Roll: Dex + Melee **Difficulty:** 8
Damage: Weapon + 2 **Actions:** 1





PRONE ATTACKS

The ability to fight prone is widely known among the Shih, who often find themselves overpowered and knocked to the ground. When prone and facing a standing opponent, many Shih just stay where they are and continue fighting, as standing back up takes time. Shih with this maneuver can perform almost any of their attacks from a prone position. They suffer no penalties, due to their extensive training, but all others in this position suffer a +2 difficulty on all attacks (to a maximum of 10).

DAGGER CLAW

The Shih use this defensive strike against any creature attempting a Leaping Rake maneuver (see *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* or *World of Darkness: Combat*), though it may be used against flying kicks if the Shih is prone or kneeling. Due to years of toughening his flesh and practicing open-handed strikes on surfaces ranging from trees to concrete walls and steel beams, the sheer toughness of the Shih's fingers lets him penetrate flesh without a weapon.

In an uncanny imitation of the hengeyokai's natural abilities, the Shih spreads the fingers of both hands in wide rakes and drives them into the underbelly of her attacker, even as she drops beneath the Leaping Rake. So long as the shapeshifter is off the ground by more than an inch or two, the Shih can elevate his foe even higher by using his feet.

The Shih inflicts an amount of damage equal to her own Strength *plus* the Strength of her opponent. This damage may be soaked. The Shih must spend one action climbing back to her feet or continue fighting from a prone position after this attack is finished.

Roll: Dex + Martial Arts Difficulty: 8

Damage: Strength + Opponent's Strength Actions: 1

SPECIAL POWERS (STRIKE FORCE ZERO)

NUMINA

Over its history, Strike Force Zero has recruited a few agents with special mental abilities, but it does not trust these agents completely — the unusual abilities these people display are too similar to the powers of the demons. Also, agents with Numina risk losing these special abilities whenever they receive new implants. A Willpower roll (difficulty 9) is required whenever a new implant is added. A failure on the Willpower roll increases the difficulty for all Numina by +1, permanently. A botch on the roll means one Numina is no longer accessible to the character.

Numina may be obtained only with freebie points, and each dot of Numina costs 10 points. The experience-point cost of increasing a Numina to the next level is the current rating x 8. Shih may not acquire Numina.

CYBER-PSI (PERCEPTION + COMPUTER)

Cyber-Psi, short for Cybernetic Psychic Connection, seems to have manifested only recently. Agents with this fledgling capability are able to communicate with computers without having to access the software in the usual fashion. Agent Enichi Kawamati was the first agent to display this talent, which has, so far, been seen only within the agency. "Wild talents" with Cyber-Psi (including children) are sought out quickly and recruited; those who refuse recruitment vanish...for the good of society.

- The character may make "surface scans" of what is written on a computer at this level. The character can read the names of programs and even the names of hidden files. With effort, the character finds hidden access codes to programs but must enter them manually.

- At this level, the character can, given several minutes of concentration, access the files in a computer and read the commands written down and the information in the files themselves.

- The character can break through complicated security systems and gain access to almost any file. However, encrypted files are still nothing but gibberish, and thus make no sense.

- Encryption-breaking becomes an easy task at this level. Command words and decoding methods for any file the character studies come easily. Extremely complex encryptions might still require several hours to break through. At this point, the character may, if concentrating and undisturbed, actually merge with the computer's "consciousness" and operate the computer from a distance. The character must be in front of the computer, or preferably touching it, to merge in this method. Most worrisome of all, the character can actually contract computer viruses, causing dangerous side effects in the human mind.

- The character can, if he is concentrating and uninterrupted, rewrite the commands within a computer system: hide or rearrange files, alter the command pathways

of programs, and even cruise onto the Internet. The same fatal flaw exists at this level; the character can, potentially, catch a computer virus, but he will normally be able to rewrite the virus even if infected.

NECRO-PSI (PERCEPTION + OCCULT)

Necromantic Psychic Ability is a frightening thing. The character can, when concentrating, communicate with the dead. However, the dead don't always wish to communicate back, and even if they do, there's a serious risk of possession at the higher levels of this Numina. Necro-Psi is risky in the extreme, and most who perform it risk their sanity and souls as well as their lives.

- At this level, the character can hear the dead speaking, but only if she concentrates. Actual communication isn't possible, but hints and clues might be revealed if an agent with this talent takes the time to hear what the dead are saying.

- The character can speak to the dead, but the best the dead can hear is apparently a whisper. Each question the agent asks might require a dozen or more repetitions before the dead respond, and there's no guarantee of an answer.

- The character can be heard plainly by the dead, which is not always good. Characters using this Numina often find themselves gaining unwanted attention from the dead, and they are sometimes the victims of a full-scale haunting.

- The dead seemingly are drawn to characters at this level. Many ghosts come around to examine the character with the same fascination that a barracuda gives to something that is bright and shiny. Worse, the character begins having trouble controlling his Necro-Psi; from time to time, the power doesn't want to shut off once it's been turned on. The character hears the voices of the dead almost constantly, and even though they might not say anything of importance, the mental noise can lead to severe distraction or insomnia.

- The character can communicate freely with the dead and can get answers to almost any question — except about what existence is like on the other side; for some reason,

NUMINA CHART

Phenomenon	Effect	Roll	Difficulty	Cost
Cyber-Psi	Telepathy with computers	Per + Computer	7	None
Necro-Psi	Telepathy with the dead	Per + Occult	8	None
Telekinesis	Mind over matter	Willpower	7	1 WP
Cyberkinesis	Mind control of computers	Per + Computer	Varies	1 WP

the dead don't like to talk about that. If the character seemed like a shiny play-toy to the dead before, she now seems like a burning sun. Ghosts are instantly attracted whenever the character communicates, and many characters at this level of talent find the dead want something more. Opening up for discussions with the dead is almost like inviting them to step inside and take over for a while. (Puppeteers have far less difficulty Soul-riding a character at this level of Necro-Psi; all difficulties are reduced by three.) Worst of all, there are dark forces out there beyond the grave, and they seem particularly interested in communication with the living. Unfortunately, what they have to say isn't very nice. Many agents at this level of power refuse to use their talents any longer, and those who don't refuse sometimes end up committing suicide.

TELEKINESIS (WILLPOWER)

Telekinesis is the ability to move objects with the power of the mind. Unlike other Numina, this ability not only costs Willpower, but also requires the use of Yang Chi at higher levels. This is a crude method of movement at best, and unless the character has practiced and studied for a very long time, it's often useless.

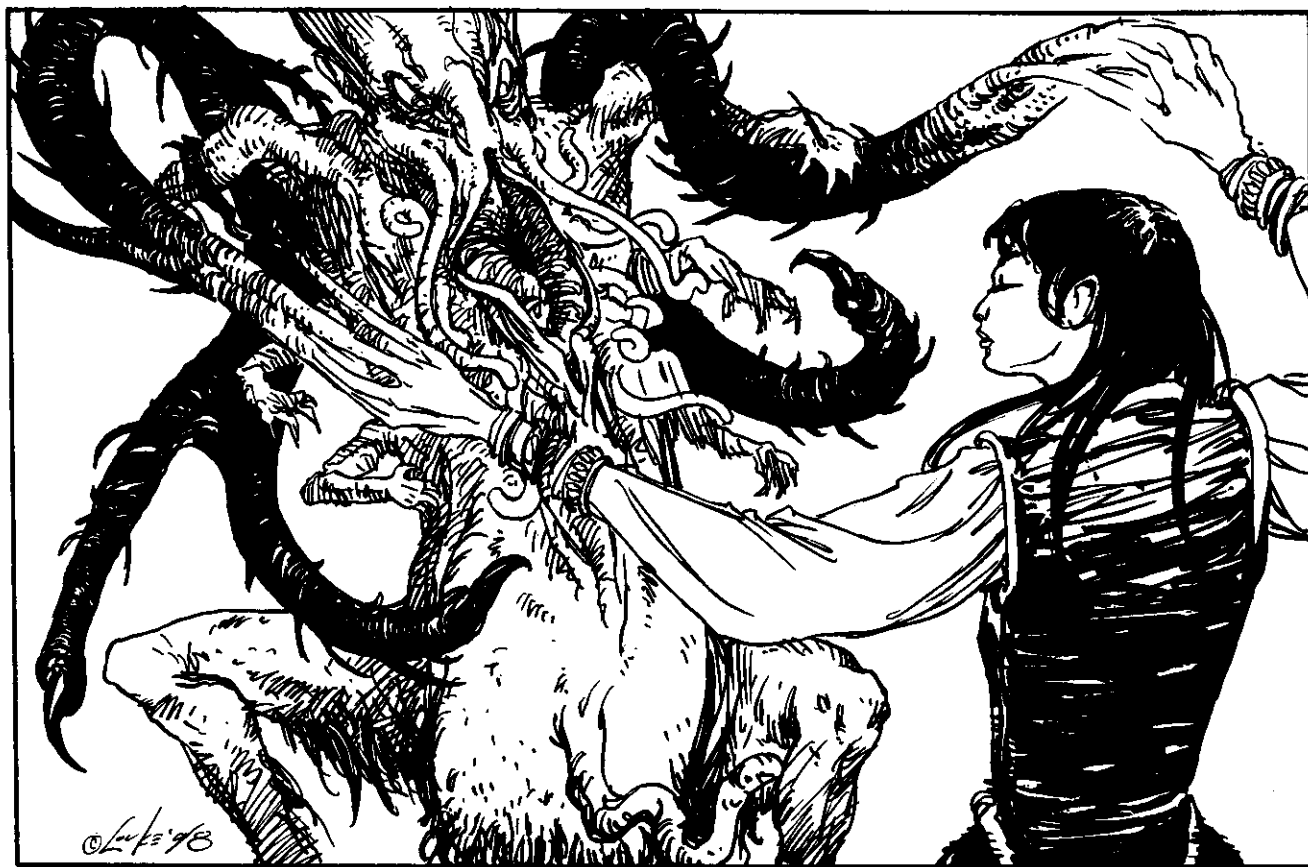
- The character can move a weight of roughly one pound and is capable of only the crudest movements. It requires substantial concentration.

- The character can lift approximately five pounds and hold the item off the ground by concentrating. Objects can be manipulated, but control is shaky at best. The agent might be able to turn a doorknob or retrieve an object just out of reach before the stress causes exhaustion.

- The character can lift around 20 pounds and maintain a mental grip on that object as readily as he moves the same object with his hands. Physically awkward shapes, such as barbells or sledgehammers, remain cumbersome despite the ability to carry them. The character must concentrate to manipulate these items.

- The character can easily lift 50 pounds and is capable of complex manipulations, such as writing a letter with a pen that is across the room. At this level, the character must spend one Yang Chi to carry any substantial weight (more than 20 pounds) for more than one turn.

- The character can catch a full-grown person and keep him off the ground for several minutes before the stress becomes overwhelming. The character can also multitask (pour a cup of coffee, write a letter, and juggle), provided that she continues to concentrate on the process. The character expends one Yang Chi to manage this throughout the scene. Any break in concentration requires the character to spend another Yang Chi before beginning again.



CYBERKINESIS (PERCEPTION + COMPUTER)

Cyberkinesis is the ability to access and gain control of a computer. Whereas Cyber-Psi permits a character to communicate with a computer, Cyberkinesis allows him to seize control of the electronic "brain" violently. There is nothing subtle or delicate about the Numina. At higher levels, the character can make the computer do tasks that are beyond its normal abilities. Simple computers are easy to handle, with difficulties of only 4 or 5, but more complex computers become harder to control. A computer designed to maintain an entire building's environment and keep track of power flow might require a roll versus difficulty 8 or 9 to possess it, while computers used for programming the Space Shuttle's trajectory would likely require a roll versus difficulty 9 or 10.

This Numina costs one Willpower per use.

- The character can activate or turn off a computer or stereo system with a thought. Who needs a remote control?

- The character can activate any program within a computer, provided that he knows the computer has that particular program.

- The character can give a computer the equivalent of an epileptic seizure, thus scrambling all programs with a thought, and she can keep those programs mixed up as long as she concentrates.

- The character can override the most complex computer security systems by shutting down individual programs and making others work against their original programming. This feat requires complete concentration.

- Given enough time, the character can reprogram a computer to do any task it is physically capable of handling. The guidance system on a nuclear warhead could be reprogrammed to return to its destination, but it still wouldn't be able to switch the channels on a television.

STRIKE FORCE ZERO SPECIAL ENHANCEMENTS

To give themselves an edge in battles against the *shen*, SF0 agents often graft high-technology implants onto their bodies. These devices enable the agents to hold their own against supernatural opponents, but at the cost of the agents' Humanity.

All SF0 agents begin with two implants, typically emotion suppressors, psi-band radios, and/or sheaths. Further implants require purchasing the Arsenal Background.

CYBERWARE AND WETWARE

There are different types of internalized equipment that can be used when rebuilding or enhancing agents. The easiest equipment to install and repair is cyberware — mechanical implants designed more for function than for appearance. Cyberware is hard technology: stainless-steel replacements for bones and hardened plastics for protection, with wiring when necessary. **Kindred of the East** gives a few examples of cyberware in the Finger Needler and Subdermal Armor. These examples are hardware, pure and simple. They're designed with a straightforward purpose and, while concealable, are fairly easy to detect with the right equipment.

SF0 also uses wetware, or bioenhancements, which are devices designed to mimic organic materials. Wetware implants are virtually undetectable and require bioelectrical energy to keep them functioning. The primary ingredients in most of these enhancements are provided by nanites (microscopic robots programmed for certain functions) and cloned flesh that has been genetically altered to produce the proper results. Most major enhancements use cloned material from agents' own bodies.

The differences between these two types of equipment are more than cosmetic. When serious firepower is needed, cyberware is a better bet: Each type of implant requires energy to continue functioning, but cyberware is designed to take ammunition in many cases and is far easier to "reload." The risk of malfunction is slightly higher with cyberware, though, and cyberware typically lacks the versatility of wetware.

Wetware is designed more for functionality and less for use as a weapon. Also, it is better for replacing vital organs and is more adaptable to unusual situations. Most cyberware enhancements are meant to be treated roughly, while the majority of wetware ones are designed to add new and often subtle changes to the agents who employ them.

Cyberware and wetware do have a characteristic in common, though: Both require bioelectrical energy to keep them active. When "dormant," the energy needed to use these implants is minimal, but when used actively, the levels of energy drain are often substantial. Cyberware requires an expenditure of Yin Chi, while wetware requires Yang Chi.

Strike Force Zero agents can use only a certain amount of their life-force before what remains becomes impossible to reach. SF0 characters have 10 Chi total, just as with everyone else. This Chi is what powers the cyberware and wetware in the agents' bodies. Just as with the Shih, the agents can gain access to an amount of each type of Chi equal to their ratings in certain Virtues. Self-Control determines how much Yin Chi a character can access, while Courage dictates how much Yang Chi can be used. Thus a character with a Self-Control of 5 and a Courage of 2 would be able to use five Yin Chi and two Yang Chi.

BIOENHANCEMENTS

Each of the following enhancements can be added at the cost of one dot in the Arsenal Background.

EMOTION SUPPRESSORS

Emotion suppressors are wetware marvels that prevent a character from panicking and from suffering the effects of the Delirium, the Mists, or the Veil. While they are amazingly effective, these suppressors have unpleasant side effects: They don't remove the memory of what a character has seen; thus, many Strike Force Zero agents suffer from chronic and debilitating nightmares. It's this very side effect that Strike Force Zero desires, as it cements the agents' hatred of the shen.

System: This device costs one Yang Chi per day.

GILLS

Although they're seldom implanted in agents, wetware gills are useful in cases where damage to the lungs or trachea has occurred. Unlike natural gills, which simply filter oxygen from water, these gills are built into the body of the agent in several key locations. Gills not only filter oxygen, but they also store it for emergency situations and even recycle it from carbon dioxide produced by human exhalation. An agent can ignore the effects of many toxic gases as a result merely by holding her breath.

System: Yang Chi is used every time the character has to use her gills for an extended period (more than a minute).

NIGHT EYES

These mechanical eyes, modeled on those of cats, are equally functional in normal light or complete darkness.

System: Unexpected and intense light can blind a character with night eyes momentarily, but after one turn, the eyes compensate for the change in lighting with no ill side effects. There is no Chi cost for using night eyes.

VIDEO EYES

Video eyes contain very small, organic cameras capable of recording every action and gesture seen by an agent for up to one hour. Retrieval of the information requires removal of the eye — which, in turn, means surgery. Video eyes can even record sound for the same length of time.

System: Each use of a video eye requires one Yang Chi.



SPY EYES

Spy eyes are detachable eyes that can be left in a location, or even move to new locations within a few feet of where they were initially placed (the eye sprouts six miniature legs that give it limited mobility — an added bonus if it's seen by anyone or anything in the room). While left in place, the agent can clearly see whatever the eye sees.

System: The agent can't use that eye to see anything else while it's detached, which causes a disastrous case of double vision. Also, the eye must be sterilized before it can be replaced in its socket. Every use of a spy eye requires the expenditure of one Yang Chi.

LIMB REPLACEMENTS

Despite the title, limb replacements seldom involve removing entire limbs. More probable is that a portion of a limb too grievously injured to be repaired is replaced and bonded with the original limb.

Important to note is that the weapons placed on the body are dangerous and often awkward. A ranged weapon that fires from the calf or ankle might be useful in a dire situation, but it isn't likely to be used under normal circumstances, as aiming it is difficult.

Due to the risks of accidentally firing these weapons, several safety factors have been incorporated. In addition to concentrating on the weapon, an agent must also loudly and clearly speak a command phrase. At least that's what agents have been told. Some agents remain convinced the command phrase was added in, so the good doctors could get a chuckle or because they're overeager fans of anime. The drawback is that the weapons are difficult to use in stealth situations — then again, it's hard to muffle the report of a pulse cannon, anyway.

PULSE CANNONS

Pulse cannons are reliable and lethal. These weapons store bioenergy, then release it as a volatile energy field designed to disrupt the bioelectrical field of anything they hit.

System: Awkward placement on the body can definitely impede use of this weapon, and the Storyteller should feel free to add penalties for any placement of this weapon below the waist. Each use of a pulse cannon drains two Yin Chi from the user, which makes it very much a last-resort weapon. (Diff. 6, Damage 8, Rate 1, Clip 1, Range 60)

TASERS

These implants work just like regular tasers but have no range. Tasers are used only while in close quarters with supernatural opponents, as the charge in these weapons would kill any human target. When engaged, microfine

needles erupt from the agent's concealing skin and jab into the target. Half a second later, they release a 500-volt charge at 100 amps — roughly enough energy to quick-fry a bull elephant. **Note:** The damage these tasers produce is aggravated on all *shen* save Kindred and Kuei-jin. Vampires have no need for their internal organs, but all other *shen* do (excluding wraiths, who are completely unaffected).

System: Using a taser costs one Yin Chi, and missing means the character is likely to suffer the damage himself. (Diff. 5, Damage 7, Rate 1, Clip 0, Range 0)

REJUVENATORS

One of the best designed and most cautiously used wetware implants is the rejuvenator. Rejuvenators are, quite simply, small nanite armies implanted within the bodies of agents for the sole purpose of keeping them alive. These nanites are designed to patch up grievous injuries on demand. Closing wounds, stopping internal bleeding, and even restarting organs that no longer function properly are all part of the services rendered. Rejuvenators can mend broken bones and even reweave damaged nerves by grafting themselves to the nerves as a combination bridge and replacement.

System: The nanites require one Yang Chi to regenerate each Health Level of damage done, and the limitation on how much Yang Chi can be spent still applies. Thus a character with a 4 Courage rating could regenerate up to four Health Levels, and no more.

SHEATHS

A sheath is a wetware pocket in the leg or arm of an agent. These pockets allow the agent to conceal a weapon or valuable item that would otherwise be confiscated on sight. Sheaths work as more than simple carrying cases; they also hide the items placed within them from most forms of detection, including X-rays and metal detectors. Once sealed, a sheath is undetectable to touch or sight, as the skin closes completely and the soft tissues around the sheath are designed to mimic human flesh.

System: When opening a sheath, an agent effectively has to concentrate no more than she would to flex her arms. The same goes for closing a sheath, but when hiding something from electronic detection, the agent must spend one Yang Chi. Many agents have sheaths implanted to let them carry their striker guns wherever they go. In the case of striker guns, the sheath must be placed in the leg.

CYBERCLAWS

Cyberclaws are ideal weapons for close combat. These razor-keen blades can be placed at the ankles, wrists, elbows and knees, and extend a full eight inches from the body. The mechanical joint housing the hollow, but very strong, metallic claws allows a wide range of motion, so an agent with cyberclaws in his wrists, for example, could rotate the blade to face in front of his hand or to either side of his hand.

GRENADES

SFO agents use various sorts of grenades, including:

SMOKE GRENADES

Smoke grenades are roughly the same shape and size as a finger, and most are launched through the user's index finger.

System: These grenades produce a thick, black smoke and reduce the visual Perception of everyone within their radius by four. (Diff. 6, Damage 0, Rate 1, Clip 5, Range 20, Radius 15)

TEAR GAS GRENADES

Tear gas grenades resemble smoke grenades, but victims within the radius of the gas — unless they're wearing protective gear or immune to the effects — not only suffer the same penalties for sight Perception, but also suffer +2 difficulties to all actions as a result of the fumes and irritant chemicals. Tear gas works by affecting the mucus membranes, the tear ducts and the skin. When hit by this gas, targets' eyes water uncontrollably, their noses run and their skin feels as though it's been soaked in gasoline and ignited.

System: Very few people or *shen* can tolerate the effects without extreme duress. Kuei-jin, no longer having functioning bodies *per se*, are immune to the worst effects, but they still suffer from visual impairment. (Diff. 6, Damage 1 — plus incapacitation, Rate 1, Clip 5, Range 20, Radius 15)

INCENDIARY GRENADES

These phosphorous bombs are given to agents only when superiors are convinced that the agents might need them.

System: The fast-burning incendiaries cause seven Health Levels of damage to anything caught within the blast radius. More importantly, they continue to burn for several minutes, unless put out with an oxygen-depleting extinguisher. Even after the phosphorus fire is extinguished, the material must be kept from any fuel in order to avoid its reigniting. (Diff. 6, Damage 7 per turn, Rate 1, Clip 3, Range 20, Radius 15)

STEEL-FOAM GRENADES

Steel-foam grenades explode in a smaller radius than most, but anything caught within their area of effect is immediately covered in a fast-hardening glue that is almost as strong as the device's namesake. This viscous substance hardens within seconds and can be removed only by using the correct chemical solution.

System: Any forcible attempts to remove the substance from flesh probably result in grievous injury. The steel-foam glue has 12 Health Levels and an effective Stamina of 8 for the purpose of soaking. (Diff. 6, Damage 0, Rate 1, Clip 7, Range 20, Radius 5)

ICE GRENADES

Ice grenades contain a small explosive and 10 liquid ounces of Freon gas. Anything caught by these deadly weapons suffers from the nasty stigma of being frozen to near absolute zero instantaneously.

System: Even those outside the immediate blast radius suffer debilitating frostbite if the Freon hits open skin. (Diff. 6, Damage 10, Rate 1, Clip 3, Range 20, Radius 10)

CONCUSSION GRENADES

This type of grenade causes damage just as standard grenades do, but all of the force sustained comes from kinetic energy. There is no flame or fragmentation. In short, only the very unlucky manage to sustain serious injuries from these weapons.

System: All damage recorded is considered "temporary," and most victims recover within an hour of being hit. Deafness is still a possibility, however, as the eardrum is a sensitive organ. (Diff. 6, Damage 10, Rate 1, Clip 6, Range 20, Radius 12)

System: A command phrase is needed to activate the cyberclaws — the agent decides what the command is, but she better choose carefully if she wants to avoid unsightly accidents — and there is an expenditure of one Yin Chi to bring the claws out. (Diff. 6, Damage 7, Range 0)

PSI-BAND RADIO

A psi-band radio is a simple device that most agents prefer to use. This cyberware device permits communication with other members of a Zero Team within a one-mile radius. The radio runs from the left ear to the left side of the jaw and is activated by touching a spot at the base of the jaw. Despite the name, no psionic talent is involved in the device's use. The radio operates on a wavelength that is remarkably close to the same frequency as the brain, however, and a few "sensitives" can hear radios being used nearby.

System: There is no Chi cost for using a psi-band radio. Many teams become adept at using psi-band radios as a means of coordinating attacks while in the field.

SNAKE FANGS

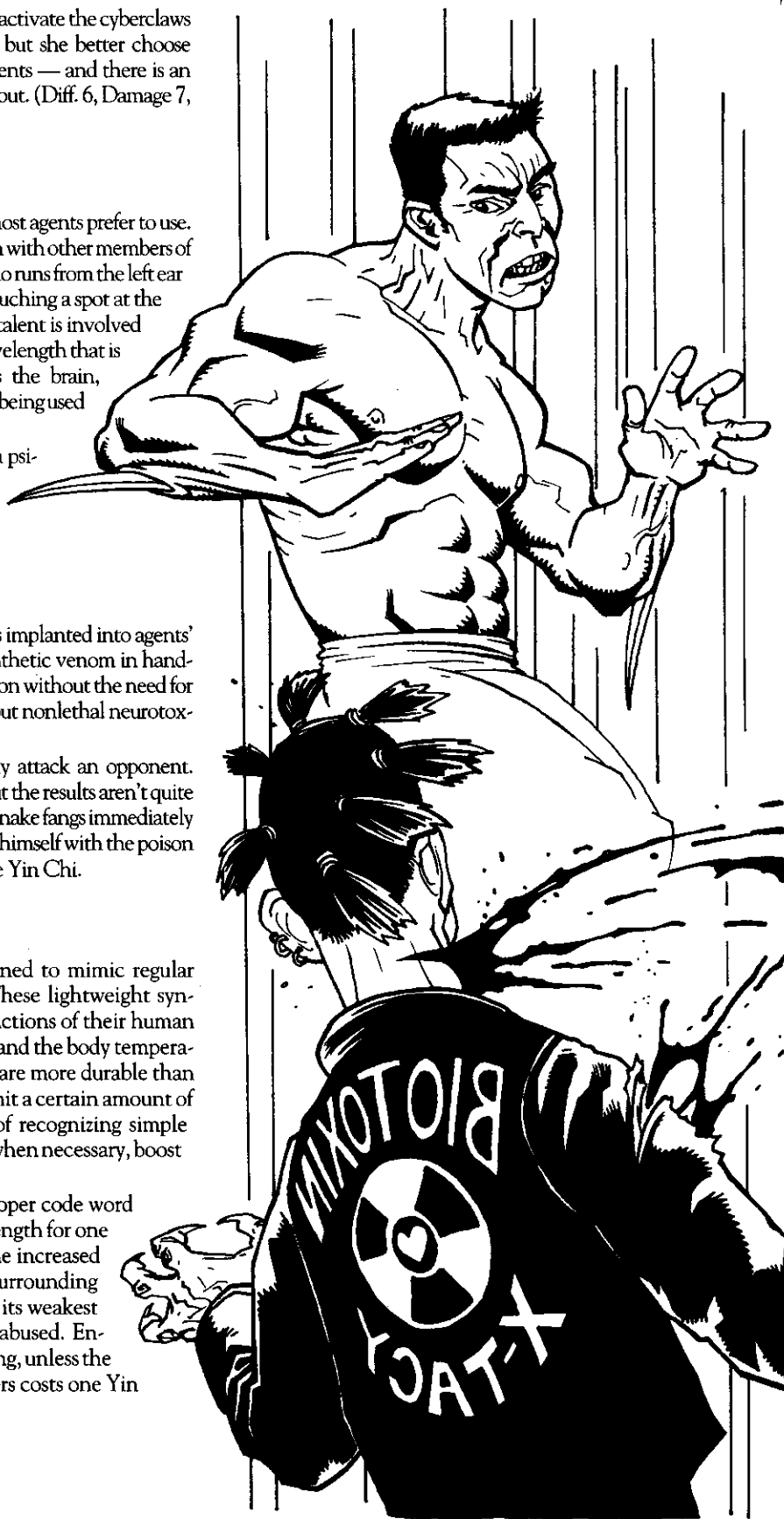
Snake fangs are simple cyberware devices implanted into agents' palms. The fangs allow the agent to inject synthetic venom in hand-to-hand combat. Small air guns inject the poison without the need for needles. Most agents prefer to use fast-acting but nonlethal neurotoxins.

System: The character must successfully attack an opponent. This poison will incapacitate most humans, but the results aren't quite as reliable on the *shen*. As an added bonus, the snake fangs immediately deliver an antidote into any agent who injects himself with the poison accidentally. Activating snake fangs costs one Yin Chi.

ENHANCERS

Enhancers are cybernetic limbs designed to mimic regular limbs, but with an added bonus or two. These lightweight synthetic limbs almost perfectly mimic the functions of their human counterparts — though they have no pulse and the body temperature is still a few degrees cooler. Enhancers are more durable than living flesh (+3 soak dice). While they permit a certain amount of sensation, they are no longer as capable of recognizing simple textures as they once were — but they can, when necessary, boost the agent's natural strength substantially.

System: On demand, and with the proper code word spoken, these limbs give their user a +5 Strength for one scene. It should be noted, however, that the increased strength is only in that limb and not in the surrounding natural tissues. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and human flesh tends to rip when abused. Enhancers are best used for punching or crushing, unless the agent is very cautious. Each use of enhancers costs one Yin Chi.



VIBROBLADES

Vibroblades can be placed into synthetic limbs with little or no difficulty. These razor-sharp, microfine blades are very good at turning whatever they touch into the equivalent of shredded wheat, but they are also exceedingly dangerous to the person using them. Missing a target in close quarters is a good way to end up with another limb missing. Vibroblades work so quickly and cut so deeply that they don't actually cause pain until a few seconds after the wound is opened. Careless agents are likely to kill themselves if they face a superior martial artist.

System: The cost for using vibroblades is one Yin Chi. (Diff. 6, Damage Str +4, Range 0)

GRENADE LAUNCHERS

An agent can have a grenade launcher placed into an artificial limb. The type of grenade fired varies by preference, and once chosen, only that type can be fired without risking a possible jammed barrel. Several types are listed below, and in all cases, the grenades can be thrown as well. Each use of a grenade launcher expends one Yin Chi, and the limb from which the grenade is fired must be straightened completely to allow the missile to leave the launcher safely.

INTERNAL TRACKING GEAR

The ITG is SFO's latest miracle of wetware. The device is designed to allow an agent to track a moving target, even if she is temporarily blinded or dazzled. The wetware works in conjunction with the user's brain and motor reflexes, effectively "locking on" to a target each time the agent takes aim and fires. Once locked on, the ITG keeps a trace on the target and maintains it until the agent's mind relaxes from combat mode. As long as the agent's body chemistry indicates a violent or stressful situation, the ITG continues tracking the target regardless of the rest of the agent's senses. In short, whether blinded, deafened or stunned, the agent can maintain the ability to hit a target once that target has been sighted. With the desire to pull the trigger, the ITG moves the agent's weapon hand to whatever location is needed to fire on an enemy. Furthermore, the ITG is designed to assist with the initial aiming of the agent's weapon.

The R & D team remains firm in the conviction that it has removed the bugs from this system, and it doubts sincerely there will be another case where an agent can sight his weapon only on his own foot. The scientists maintain that the "foot removal incident" was a one-time fluke.

System: The user gains a +2 to all Firearms and Melee (to hit only, not to the actual damage caused) rolls when the ITG is active. Activation costs one Yang Chi.

WEB SPINNERS

Web spinners are cyberware pumps and reels designed to eject a fast-drying, steel-hard paste. This gluey substance works as a close encounter restraint and long-range snare, depending on the desires of the user. As with virtually all of the Strike Force's internal

weaponry, both the mental desire and a verbal command are required to activate the web spinner. The actual barrels of the paste guns are implanted in the fingertips of the agent, which allows a literal point-and-shoot targeting method. The glue produced remains hard and slightly flexible until the proper chemical compounds are used to dissolve it.

System: Diff. 6, Damage 0*, Rate 1, Clip 4, Range 40

*The glue released by the web spinners is exceedingly strong, with eight Health Levels and an effective Stamina of 6 for the purposes of soaking damage. Activation costs one Yin Chi.

FIELD ARMOR

The rarely seen Series IV Portable Analysis and Assault Station, or "Field Armor" as the agents continually call it, is a miracle of modern science. The lightweight alloy of the armor covers the head and chest, with additional attachments for combat gloves and boots.

The built-in analysis center includes an electron microscope and a forensics lab for identifying fingerprints, fiber samples, blood samples and erroneous genetic material. While the field armor is very useful for analysis, it still requires several hours to identify individual recorded data and a modem hookup to permit the data flow to and from SFO Headquarters. The armor can be used for parabolic long-range hearing, scanning radio waves — don't get caught playing your favorite station — and infrared and ultraviolet scans, as added protection.

This armor is extraordinarily rare and highly experimental. Few SFO agents are permitted even to see it, let alone use it in the field.

System: As with all of Strike Force Zero's most delicate and advanced equipment, each suit of field armor is attuned to an individual's bioelectrical patterns. Special sensor pads placed at each temple, just under the surface of the skin, permit a user to use mental commands alone for activating the special equipment. The armor gives the wearer Class Two protection over the head and torso. It has minimal power systems, but for activation of the physical enhancers built into the combat gloves and boots, one Yang Chi must be spent.

The combat gloves and boots increase the user's Strength by two for the purpose of attacking. They do not grant any additional bonuses for lifting, as the tissues beneath the armor are not strong enough to compensate for the lift differential. Space is provided for use of each individual's implants, and additional weapons could, theoretically, be added to the armor, which is still experimental and in need of proper refinement — the delicate sensor arrays have a tendency to malfunction if the armor is damaged.

KEYPADS

Keypads are implanted cyberware designed to give the user access to secured systems. When in use, microcomputers built directly into the systems analyze any locking mechanism or computer security system and seek the best method for bypassing the physical or electronic defenses. Descramblers built into the

mechanisms can decode most known encryptions and are “smart” enough to add in new codes as they break them. Keypads are implanted in the hands of a user and are always working.

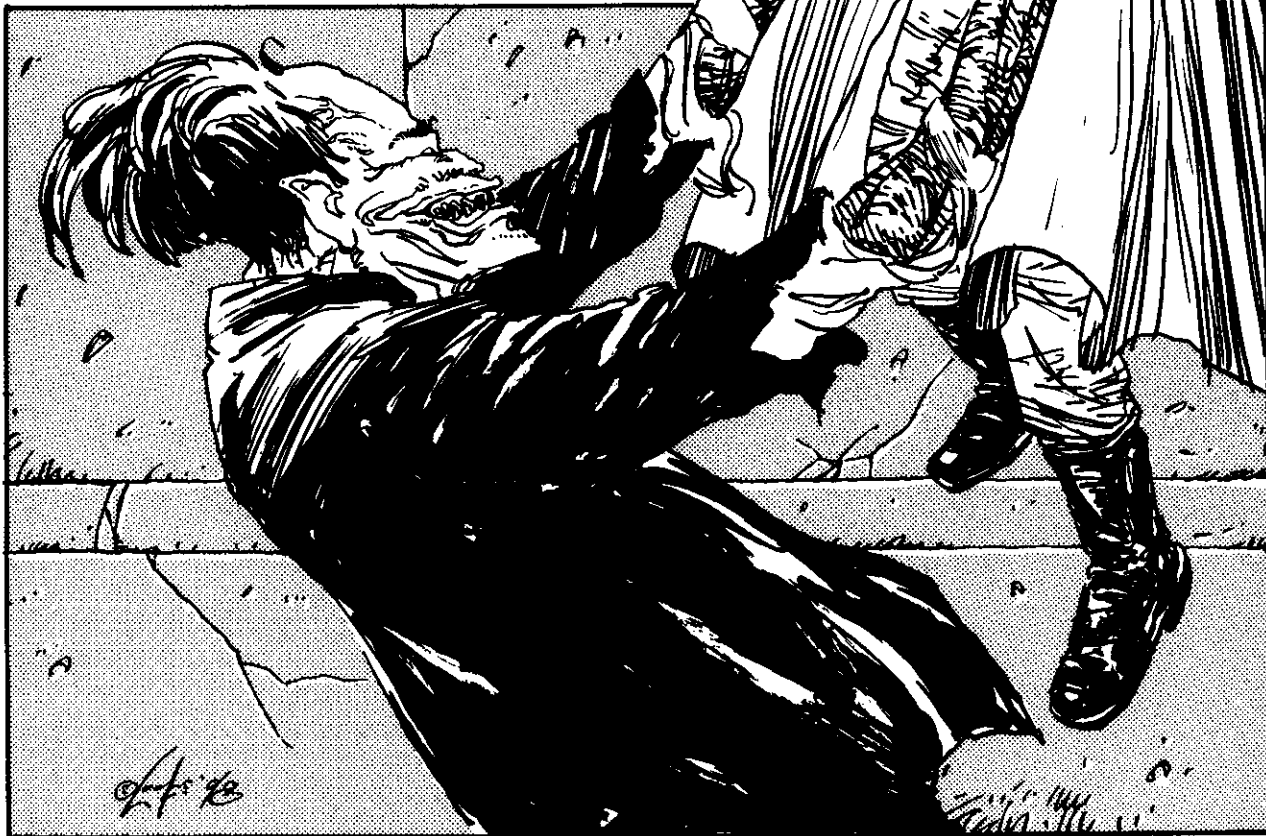
System: Keypads reduce the difficulty of all Security and Lockpicking rolls by three but require several minutes to analyze most entry deterrents fully.

Keypads require one Yin Chi per day, but only if they are in an active mode, otherwise, the drain of bioelectrical energies is minimal.

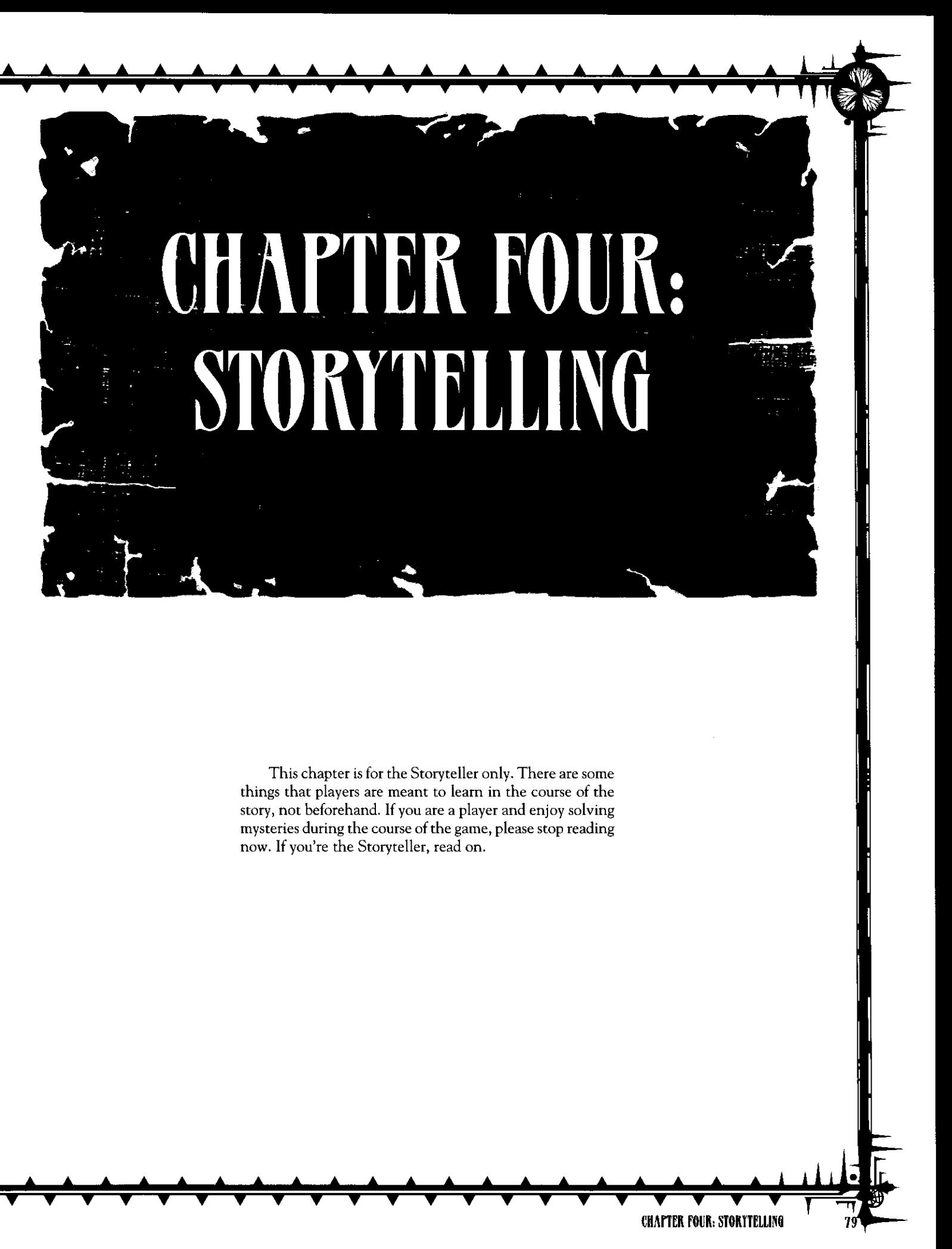
KABUKI MASKS

Due to the delicate nature of espionage, the Strike Force has designed a new implant recently for placement under agents' facial skin. This device, a Kabuki mask, is designed to alter the shape of an agent's face in subtle ways. The length and width of the nose, the shape of the eyes, the height of the cheekbones, and the length of the jawline can be altered enough to change a person's appearance completely. Even the apparent age can be altered because the mask increases or decreases the amount of tension on the flesh. The same principle works to alter the tone of voice by changing the tension on the vocal chords. This process is painful and takes several minutes to make the alterations. It has already proved effective.

System: Activation of the Kabuki mask requires one Yang Chi, but once activated, it maintains the new facial persona until the agent either requires a new face or wishes to resume his previous identity. While the mask isn't capable of allowing the agent to redesign his face to match the appearance of someone else, modifications are underway and will hopefully permit changes to the hairline and allow a preprogrammed set of false identities in the near future.







CHAPTER FOUR: STORYTELLING

This chapter is for the Storyteller only. There are some things that players are meant to learn in the course of the story, not beforehand. If you are a player and enjoy solving mysteries during the course of the game, please stop reading now. If you're the Storyteller, read on.

THE REAL HISTORY BEHIND STRIKE FORCE ZERO

Strike Force Zero has been around a lot longer than the players are meant to know. There is a degree of truth in the history given in Chapter Two, but there are also a lot of falsehoods.

Geichin Okamoto is the founder of Strike Force Zero. He does, indeed, have very influential friends in the Japanese government who make certain that the Strike Force is taken care of and allowed to continue; however, there is also a great deal more pressure to shut down the organization than Okamoto lets on. (In the course of time you might want to drop a few hints about that fact.)

SF0 didn't start working actively until 1989. However, its progenitor was founded in 1952. The Force started as a covert action team and dealt heavily in espionage. The moneys used to create DTI and Strike Force Zero were a result of stealing technological secrets from rival companies and selling them to the highest bidder, while making sure DTI got a good deal of the bounty.

Okamoto founded SF0, but he didn't run it until much later. He was far too busy working as an agent and building the connections that give him so much freedom now. While much of the country was planning new methods for surviving the defeat of the Empire of the Rising Sun, Okamoto was putting his own plans into action.

Strike Force Zero started off working in a field that is all too familiar to most countries these days: industrial espionage. On one occasion, Okamoto smiled to his closest friends and said: "The warfare of the past is obsolete. Wars now are fought with economic might and won by those who have the newest toys. We will win this war." To date, his statement rings true — DTI is one of the largest, most powerful privately owned corporations in the world market.

What Okamoto doesn't know, or perhaps has refused to see, is that his efforts have been supported since the early '50s by a power behind the scenes. Okamoto's plans have always been to build an organization that could work toward removing the supernatural threats from Japan and other countries. To that end, he has used any means he could find, ranging from espionage — industrial and political — to blackmail and bribery. Okamoto has dedicated himself to bringing the



The Zaibatsu — the Japanese branch of the Technocracy — is a very subtle group, but a very dangerous one, nonetheless. The Zaibatsu's philosophy of what reality should be is somewhat extreme, though its intentions are noble enough. The Zaibatsu is powerful, wealthy beyond comprehension, and often ruthless in the pursuit of its goals. While Okamoto might stop himself from going to dangerous extremes in making his dreams a reality, the Zaibatsu has no intention of stopping for any reason whatsoever. Its ultimate goal is one all too familiar to the world's mages: to create "reality deviants" (i.e., *shen*) and make them available through the introduction of beneficial *shen* to the enlightenment of the human mind.

The Zaibatsu is responsible for Japan — though by no means all — of modern Japan's industrial success. Through clandestine aid and subtle engineering of what Japan's Sleepers were already accomplishing on their own, the Zaibatsu speeded Japan's rebirth by making it a powerful industrial nation; but, it worked backwards only when the Japanese people were already moving. No one was more surprised than the Zaibatsu when it discovered Okada's industrial espionage, and no one was more eager to know how they found out what the man was really after. The Zaibatsu, in essence, the perfect tool of the Technocracy, has already work in union with the Technocracy, and the bulk of the hard work had already been accomplished for them.

Very few people within the Japanese government know about Strike Force Zero. Those who do are usually too afraid of the secrets Okamoto could reveal to interfere or drive against SF0. But the Zaibatsu trust, such fears, has manipulated its own Sleepers in the government to ensure certain Okamoto is too busy worrying about his "weak links" in his power base to fret about the possible infiltration of the Strike Force.

SFO's existence was deliberately leaked to the world powers only a decade ago. Until that point, the Zaibatsu didn't feel comfortable enough with its own hold over the agency to risk exposure. That's no longer a serious concern for the Japanese Technocracy; it has what it wanted all along — a powerful ally capable of handling the dirty work of monster-slaying.

But even the Zaibatsu isn't omnipotent. There are certain difficulties in running Strike Force Zero that Okamoto alone seems capable of handling. The agreement allowing SFO to work in other countries is very shaky and includes only a few of the major Asian countries. Europe, the Middle East and the United States are all *officially* unaware of the organization, and they intend it to stay that way.

The Zaibatsu is the Japanese branch of the Technocracy, a part of a much larger operation. As with any group, the Zaibatsu has its own agenda. While the Technocracy has plans for the human race as a whole, the Zaibatsu has more immediate plans for Japan.

The Zaibatsu wants it to be first among nations in technology and prosperity. To that end, Japan has gone much farther than many other countries in the matter of public awareness. The Zaibatsu has aided in corporate growth, certainly, but it has also worked to ensure that everyone knows the value of technology. The animated shows seen on television often reflect the Zaibatsu's values regarding importance of superior technology. The animated shows emphasize the abilities of science to replace gods and protect the world from alien menaces.

...altering the paradigm of Japan and its high-tech success. Thus far — despite a few recent economic setbacks — Japan has been very successful. Many of the instruments used by Japan and the Zero would fail to work anywhere else in the world because the Zaibatsu is alien to the game as far as most of the Technocracy is concerned. The instruments used by the FO are not technology. They are magick. They're magick just the same. They're part of magic that's 100 years old. For now, though, the instruments of the Zaibatsu are in most parts of the world, and Japan is the only one of the areas.

When a Strike Team request comes in, though it might take months to manage it. Not even SF0 agents, they are magickal in nature — the strike and defence are so very mundane. Still, most of the more advanced technology used all of the implants, are so very magick. That might be very understated and well-known, yet remains unknown from the user. As SF0 agents aren't magickal, they have no access to the ambient magickal energy. Here, the magickal Devices draw on

...secretly at large doesn't approve of the Zaibatsu's
... It fears, perhaps rightly so, that the
technomagick being handed over to the Strike Force could
stretch the limits of acceptability and inspire a great Paradox
backlash. Only time will tell.

The Zaibatsu, for its part, cares little for the opinion of its global brethren. After all, until the end of World War II, the Zaibatsu was barely acknowledged by the Technocracy. It did little to change the paradigm and less to end the threat of reality deviants. That's changed a great deal, but many of the same people who were in power in the past are still in power today. And the leaders of the Zaibatsu have a long memory for slights. The balance of power within the Technocracy is changing, and the Zaibatsu is doing everything it can to make certain it is at the top of the pyramid when the tectonic shifts finally occur.

RELATIONS WITH OTHER NATIONS

Strike Force Zero is, for lack of a better phrase, a shadow organization. Even in supposedly "allied" nations, agents are typically treated with a minimum of tolerance. It's often best to sneak into other countries, as most agents find it hard to work discreetly while constantly escorted, harassed or shadowed by agents from the countries they're visiting.

Aside from fears of discovery by legitimate powers, many of the groups the Strike Force hunts — both human and *shen* — have their own influences in the government forces. If the "bad guys" have a better hold over the government forces than the Strike Force has, the agents could all too easily find themselves handed over to their targets on a silver platter.

THE ASIAN UNDERWORLD

Take everything negative you've heard about the Mafia in the United States and multiply it by a heavy factor. That's a hint of what the criminal underworld in Asia is about. The criminal minds in the Middle Kingdom have honed their illegal skills over centuries of practice.

Drug trafficking, slavery, prostitution, arms dealing and black marketeering are as solid a part of life in the Orient as spices and rice. Despite Asia's abundance of resources, poverty beyond anything imaginable in the U.S. is also a regular aspect of life in many areas. Some families sell their children to victimizers because they can't afford to feed them, let alone raise them.

The philosophy of life in much of Asia differs radically from what most people in the West can comfortably understand. Though many of Asia's younger generations are beginning to turn away from long-held tradition, much of the region still adheres to strict disciplines that would seem almost cruel to the typical middle-class American family. Things are as they are because they have always been so; one is to accept one's place in society and life with little question. For that reason, the criminal organizations have little trouble working in fairly open ways. Better the devil you know, after all...

Silence is also a powerful force in most of Asia. People don't speak about their problems unless the person they speak to is as close as family. The tongs and triads thrive on the insularity of the communities in which they dwell. Some of the criminal empires in Asia are centuries old and better established than the legitimate governments. More importantly, those very same organizations often offer the only real economy in some areas. If not for the money they generate and the jobs they provide, many regions of Asia would collapse.

Despite the evil these groups do, they are also the only real law in some areas. The street gangs provide money, career opportunities and security. Why would the local people surrender all of that for the chance to starve and fear every knock on the door? What is morally correct in the eyes

of the government has little bearing on the lives of the people living on the streets. This syndrome is by no means unique to Asia, but the acceptance of this dilemma is far more complete in much of the Middle Kingdom.

Put another way, why would the average person on the street help a Strike Force Zero agent? Those on the street have nothing to gain by assisting SFO in bringing down the criminal organizations, and everything to lose. "Criminal" is in the eye of the beholder.

It's a little easier among the Shih — they're on the streets every day and night, not retreating to the safety of their expensive homes or the security of their office when they need to recover. The Shih are as much an accepted part of the local area as the triads and tongs in many cases. They work for the same goal to a certain degree: protecting the local people from threats that could cause grievous harm.

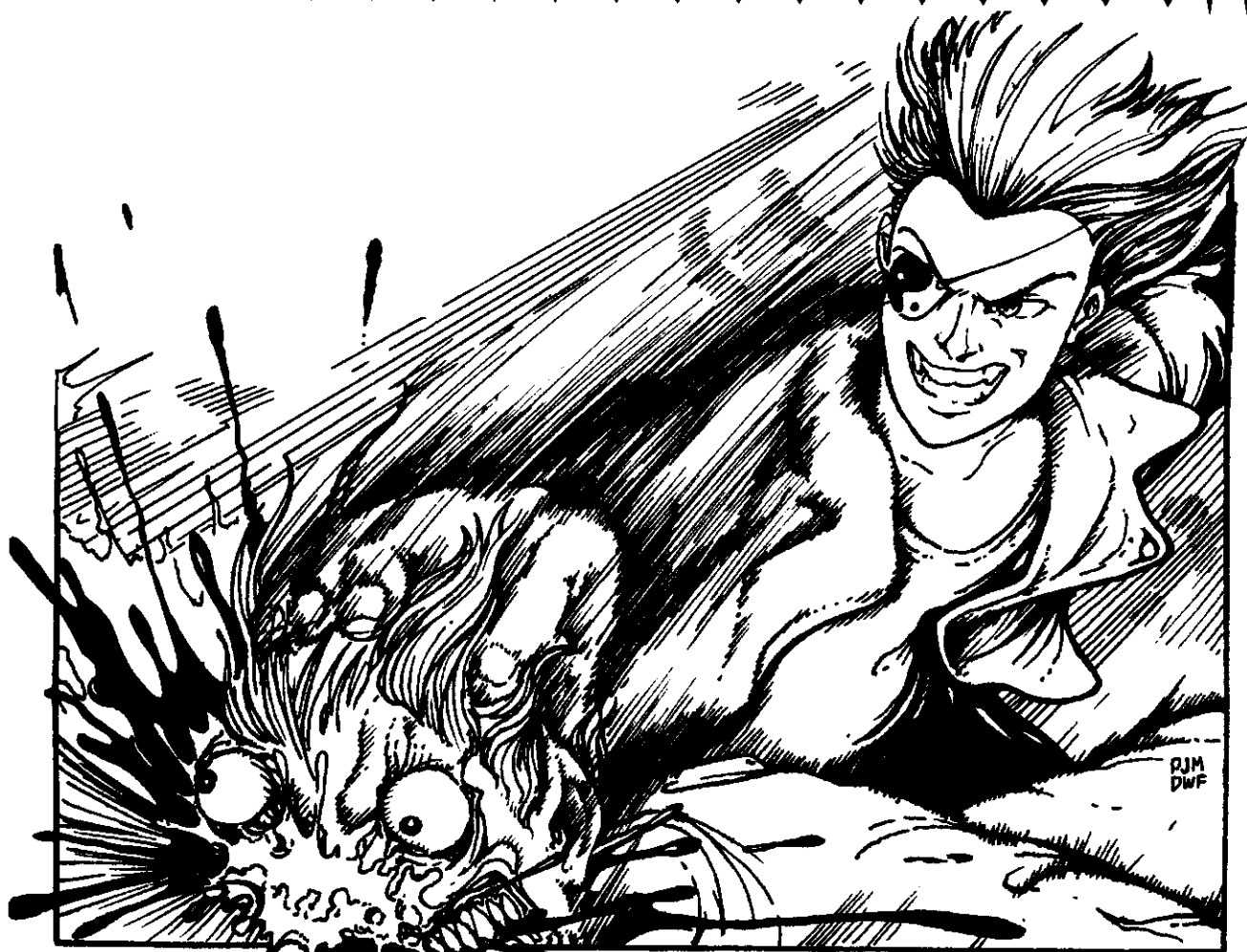
Still, even Shih often find it difficult to deal with the underworld. The tongs and criminals are frequently in league with the forces the demon hunters seek to defeat. Shih are respected by the locals, and even by the criminals, but respect by no means equates to trust. Then, too, sometimes the demons that the Shih are hunting are also responsible for keeping communities fed and children safe.

THE YAKUZA

Japan's infamous Yakuza *gumi* do more than just deal weapons and drugs; they are the neighborhood protection society in many places, and they are far more efficient than any police force. Contrary to the attitudes portrayed by Hollywood, the Yakuza serves an important role in Japanese society. They have always worked to make justice swift and fair for the people they deal with. Rapists and muggers caught by them very often end up as an example of why behaving oneself is the best action one could take.

The Yakuza demands loyalty and respect from those who work for it. In exchange, it provides protection and law for the people in the area. This has been the case for longer than the United States has been around. The Yakuza isn't about random violence and mayhem; it's about order and discipline. Of course, much like the Mafia, many of the Yakuza's younger members have cast aside their traditions and honor, thus becoming little more than violent thugs.

The Yakuza, like the triads, was originally a response to the feudal lords in times when those who weren't samurai had no voice, no rights and no safety. Yakuza were rowdies and gamblers, but they protected the local communities and made certain that those who dealt with them were kept safe. That's still true in many ways; only the methods of making money and keeping the local economy viable have changed



in time. Thus, dealing with the Yakuza is dangerous for outsiders, doubly so because those who ask too many questions are likely to get noticed.

TRIADS

Triads are much like the Yakuza. They deal with the locals fairly in instances when judgment is needed, and they offer protection from outside forces. This protection normally comes in the form of crushing the competition of others trying to muscle in on the triads' business, but the protection is there nonetheless.

Triads are similar in some respect to the Yakuza, but there are many differences between the two. Triads deal in slavery, and their tendrils extend over larger areas. Perhaps the biggest difference is that the triads are more open in their illegal dealings. They acknowledge their right to run brothels and sell people to the highest bidders. They are also more ruthless in dealing with anyone foolish enough to step on their collective toes.

The triads are the old school of enforcers — willing to do anything to keep their power base unmolested and very protective of all they see as theirs. It's never wise to cross a triad, and it's also fatal for anyone who is caught. Oddly enough, the triads are the first to step into someone else's territory if there's a profit to be made,

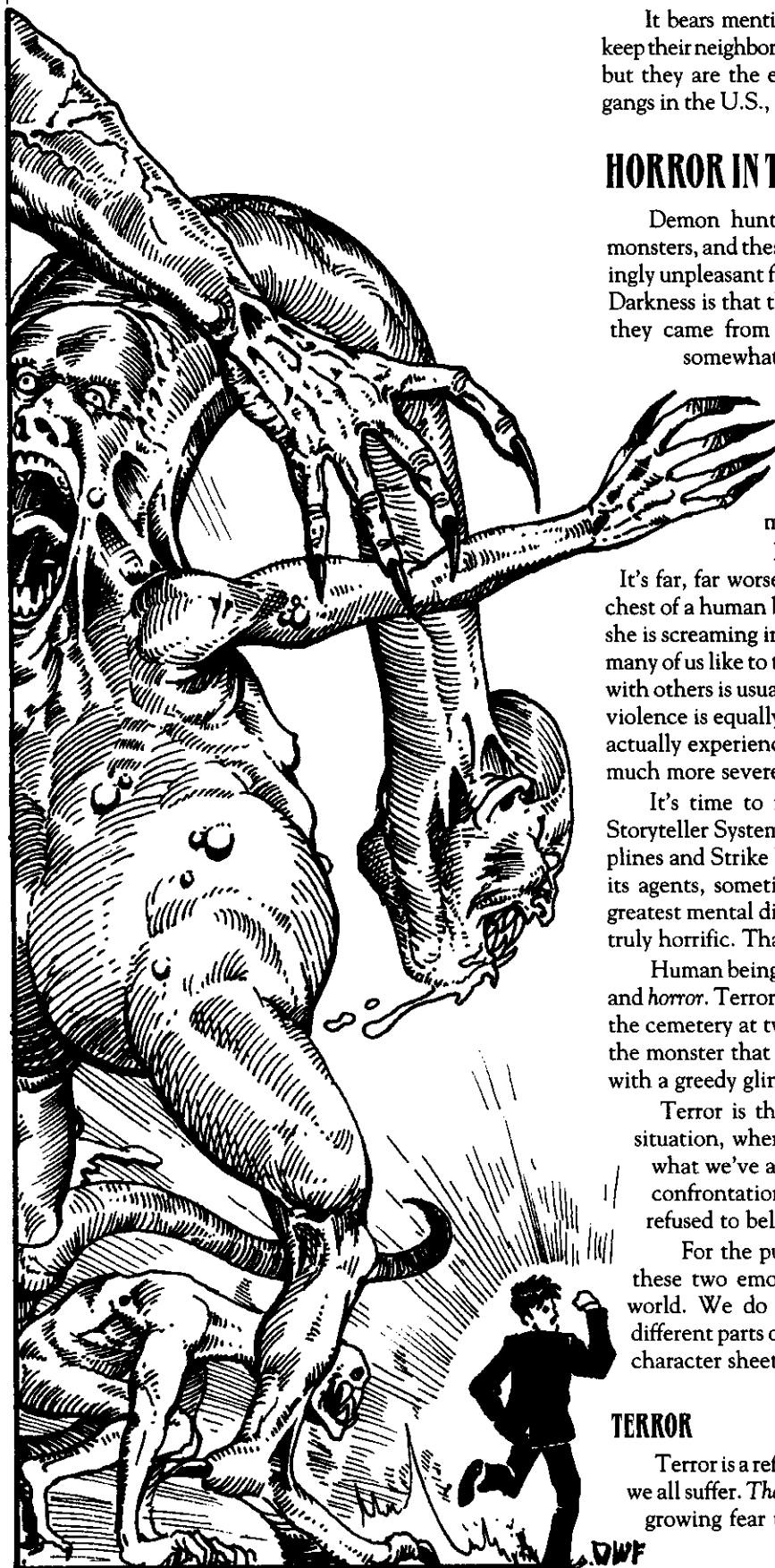
and wars between these groups are commonplace. Yet, they're still often looked on as protectors by the locals, most of whom would rather turn to a triad than the local law-enforcement agencies.

TONGS

Tongs are a different story. The tongs are more like local street gangs than true organized crime cartels. Instant cash, instant power and ruthless enforcement of their rules are the norm for the tongs, who demand money for the protection they offer — whether or not that protection is wanted. If triads resemble distant, mostly benign feudal lords, tongs are the highwaymen who take what they want and care little for who or what falls in the process. These gangs rule through intimidation and fear and use violence to make their point.

Tongs are a great deal more common than true triads. Not as solidly established as triads, tongs come and go depending on which gang is fastest with a gun or knife. Most tongs seek the same sort of power the triads hold, but they lack the organization and know-how to get anywhere near their goal.

Tongs deal in whatever suits their present purposes; arms, slavery, drugs, and enforcement are just a few of their purviews. When it comes to obtaining power, the tongs are willing to try anything and, as a result, they are often easy prey for the Kuei-jin and other *shen*.



It bears mentioning that some tongs actually do seek to keep their neighborhoods safe from outside criminal elements, but they are the exception, not the rule. Much like street gangs in the U.S., they primarily consist of cheap hoodlums.

HORROR IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

Demon hunters work in a deadly trade. They hunt monsters, and these monsters, as a rule, behave in an exceedingly unpleasant fashion. One of the truisms of the World of Darkness is that the monsters themselves, no matter where they came from or how noble they attempt to be, are somewhat desensitized to the supernatural world in which they live. They accept violence as a part of their world and have immunized themselves to the worst effects of that violence. It isn't and shouldn't be that easy for the humans who hunt the monsters.

It's bad enough to merely see a werewolf.

It's far, far worse to see a werewolf bury its muzzle in the chest of a human being and feast on her warm entrails while she is screaming in agony. We humans are, contrary to what many of us like to think, fragile beings. Our desire for contact with others is usually very strong, and our stomach for severe violence is equally weak. Movies and TV are one thing, but actually experiencing real-life terror or violence can create much more severe emotional shock.

It's time to reflect that aspect a little better in the Storyteller System. Although Shih have their mental disciplines and Strike Force Zero installs emotion suppressors in its agents, sometimes the hardware isn't enough, and the greatest mental discipline can crumble when faced with the truly horrific. That's what makes demon hunters human.

Human beings, including demon hunters, can feel *terror* and *horror*. Terror is a shiver when we hear a strange noise in the cemetery at two in the morning. Horror is when we see the monster that made the strange noise coming toward us with a greedy glint where its eyes used to be.

Terror is the slow buildup of anxiety over a strange situation, when the world slowly falls out of kilter from what we've always assumed to be the truth. Horror is a confrontation with the truth in whose existence we've refused to believe.

For the purposes of game mechanics, we'll separate these two emotions more than is necessary in the real world. We do this because terror and horror work on different parts of the mind, and on different Virtues on the character sheet.

TERROR

Terror is a refined emotion, a distillation of the anxieties we all suffer. *The X-Files* often deals with terror — the quiet growing fear that can sweep through us when we least

expect it. When the time comes for the *characters* to realize what many of the *players* already know, the Storyteller might request a terror roll. The *players* understand that vampires have their pawns in every government of significance on the planet, but the *characters* don't know or even suspect that truth. Not yet. With enough digging and probing, the *characters* are going to discover that *something* is going on, and whatever that something is, it isn't pretty.

Imagine being a member of Strike Force Zero, working on trying to find another of these odd mutants who goes around sucking on blood. After several hours of picking through the *shen's* computer files, you discover the truth that only a very small number of people in Strike Force Zero already know: These bloodsuckers aren't just a handful of post-atomic aberrants. They're everywhere! They've got names, they've got bank accounts, and they've got information dating back hundreds of years, dealing with famous and infamous historical figures. This one, this...40-year-old man you've been chasing for the last month...has personal notes he exchanged with George Washington and journals relating with fondness the time he spent feeding on Marie Antoinette. He's got a file of letters outlining his dealings with Stalin and Lenin. He's got a picture of him and Richard M. Nixon sitting together and smiling...worst of all, the picture was taken in the Oval Office. And that's just the tip of the iceberg; he keeps making references to his sire, and her relationship with Julius Caesar. He mentions how effortlessly he managed to infiltrate the Nazi party in Germany back in the '30s, and how much he enjoyed seeing his sire again, even if he disagreed with her about the need to share the information they learned with the rest of their clan in Chicago. That's all bad, but when he mentions the plans for infiltrating Japan, despite the troubles with the Japanese Cathayans — just a passing reference, nothing solid for you to look over — you've got to consider the implications of that casual statement. Did he manage this infiltration? If so, where is he now and who is he talking to? What, exactly, is this plan to infiltrate, and when did it start? Is it too late to stop him?

Bad, right? Enough to make you a little sweaty? That's when you want a terror roll. That's when all the discipline and all the cybernetic brain supplements in the world don't mean a damned thing. Because discipline is just a mental exercise, a way of confronting something you're prepared for, much like building calluses on your knuckles by punching a stone wall. Emotion suppressors are designed solely to prevent an overwhelming panic attack in a combat situation. They allow a certain amount of numbness, but they don't shut off emotions completely or they'd inhibit the very qualities Strike Force Zero looks for in its agents.

So, in order to avoid a panic attack from the alarming implications of vampires infiltrating most of the world's governments, the aforementioned character needs to make a Self-Control roll. The difficulty of the Self-Control check is in the hands of the Storyteller. Success means the character has managed, for the present time at least, to assimilate the

information and keep her cool. (Later, when she's trying to sleep in the safe, comfortable bed — provided as a perk of the job, the *government* job — in the dark, where these blood-suckers feel perfectly at home, she might ponder the implications again and give them more serious consideration than she did before.)

Failure means the character begins obsessing over the implications. *If these vampires did infiltrate the Japanese government, where are they now? Do they know about me? Do they know about the job I'm doing right now, breaking into their private property and looking over their thoughts? If so, how are they going to feel about that?* If a full-blown panic attack occurs, the character might need sedation for a while, or she might simply look at the files in front of her and stare blankly as a cold, greasy sweat sprouts across her forehead and runs down her back.

Botches, however, are the worst. A botch means the character develops a Derangement, though it might not manifest immediately. (Derangements tend to like a little time to ferment, to grow more potent before they show themselves.) The mental aberration that presents itself should match the scenario given. In the case mentioned above, the likeliest Derangement is paranoia. The character just found out that the government might very well be compromised and under the influence of vampires. The character's life is in danger, as are the lives of any loved ones she might have thought safe when she changed her identity. The question here is who can she trust? The answer, if she's suffering from a Derangement, is absolutely no one. Play on that for a while and see how the character feels about turning her back on the rest of her Strike Team.

HORROR

Horror is the visceral, in-your-face Oh My God It Ate Frank's Head sort of stuff we've all seen plenty of, courtesy of Michael Myers, Freddie Krueger and Jason Voorhees. For a horror movie, there's no such thing as too much. For a **Demon Hunter X** chronicle, there may very well be. Demon hunters are jaded, yes, but certain events can still push a character over the edge. Not every dead body is going to freak out a Shih warrior, but one that's been violated in a spectacular fashion might do so. Strike Force agents are even easier to freak out; they haven't been preparing for this for 20 years. It's one thing to accept the reality of the Kuei-jin, quite another to be faced by one. It's even harder to be rational if the Cathayan in question just ripped the head off your informant, whom you'd just started to like.

A player whose character experiences a horrific situation must make a Courage roll. The difficulty depends on the extremity of the situation and is in the hands of the Storyteller. As a rule, if a character's already faced a dozen Kuei-jin, the sight of another is unlikely to require a roll. If, on the other hand, the demon hunter sees, for the first time, a werespider turn from a man into a gibbering horde of black spiders with venom-dripping fangs, she might have

to make a Courage roll versus difficulty 6, or even higher if said Kumo is in its lair and surrounded by a dozen desiccated corpses.

A successful Courage roll means the character keeps her cool and can act as her player desires. Failure means it's time to fight or flee, and that's the territory of the Storyteller. Fleeing might mean a serious problem if the vampire lives on the 30th floor. Fighting, in this case, is a completely different beast than calmly taking out a striker gun and choosing ammunition carefully. Fighting in this case means killing anything that gets in your way as you try to find the quickest exit route. Or it might mean that your good friend on the Zero Team is viewed as an excellent extra level of armor between you and the *thing* that just returned to its lair.

Botching means a Derangement and it means catatonic fear. The mind of the character, trapped by too much pressure in too short a time, shuts down. As with the fight-or-flee situation for merely failing, this could mean either a true state of catatonia, where everything stops working altogether, or it can mean a fugue situation, where the character blacks out and remembers nothing of

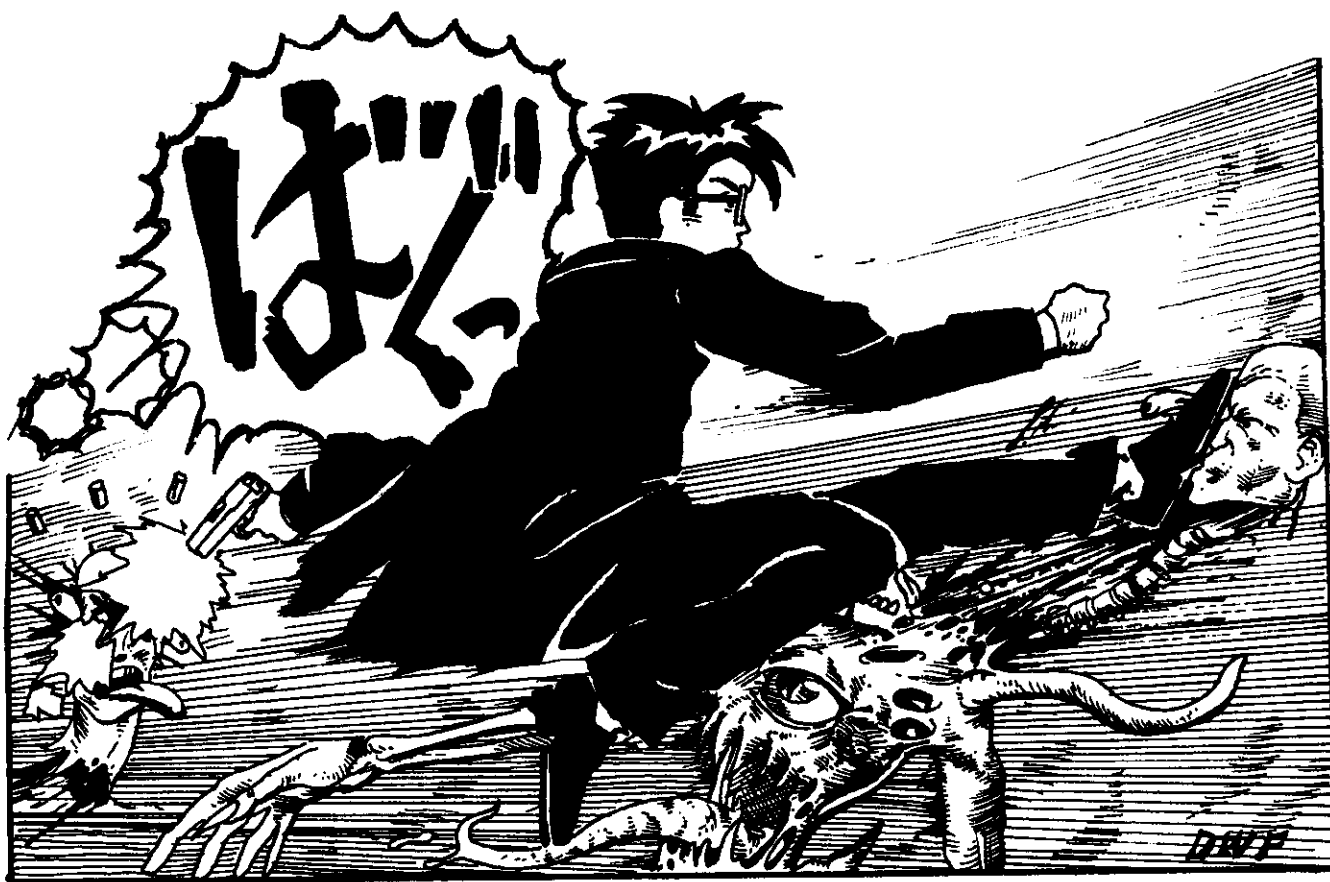
what happens in the next few minutes. A lot can happen in those few minutes. A person can be killed, or a mind can be seized and reshaped.

THE WORLD OF DARKNESS, ANIME-STYLE

The mood of *Demon Hunter X* is intended to be a change of pace from the typical World of Darkness fare. Most readers have probably detected a few hints of anime influence in the pages. If you haven't, maybe you should go rent a few of those wonderful epics.

The differences between standard animation and Japanese anime are often vague, but very real. Anime tends to explore more aspects of human nature than most Western animation; it also involves a great deal more violence, sex, violence, carnage, and violence. Look at a movie like *Akira* and then watch Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. It's hard to believe they have anything in common at all.

Anime tends toward dark, mature themes, even when there's humor spun into the tale to take away some of the sting. In striving for this anime feel, the Storyteller should remember this last fact;



she should also keep in mind that the rules and conventions of anime storytelling allow for several new types of character interaction.

We've already discussed how Yin and Yang Chi are recovered naturally, but perhaps we should add a few new aspects to the game. Let circumstance and character reaction play a part in the recovery of Chi and see if it doesn't make a difference in how the players react. For example, most anime involves a group of people working together. In the classic anime tales, that group was normally four or five characters (coincidentally enough, just like a Strike Team), and there were almost always a few rivalries.

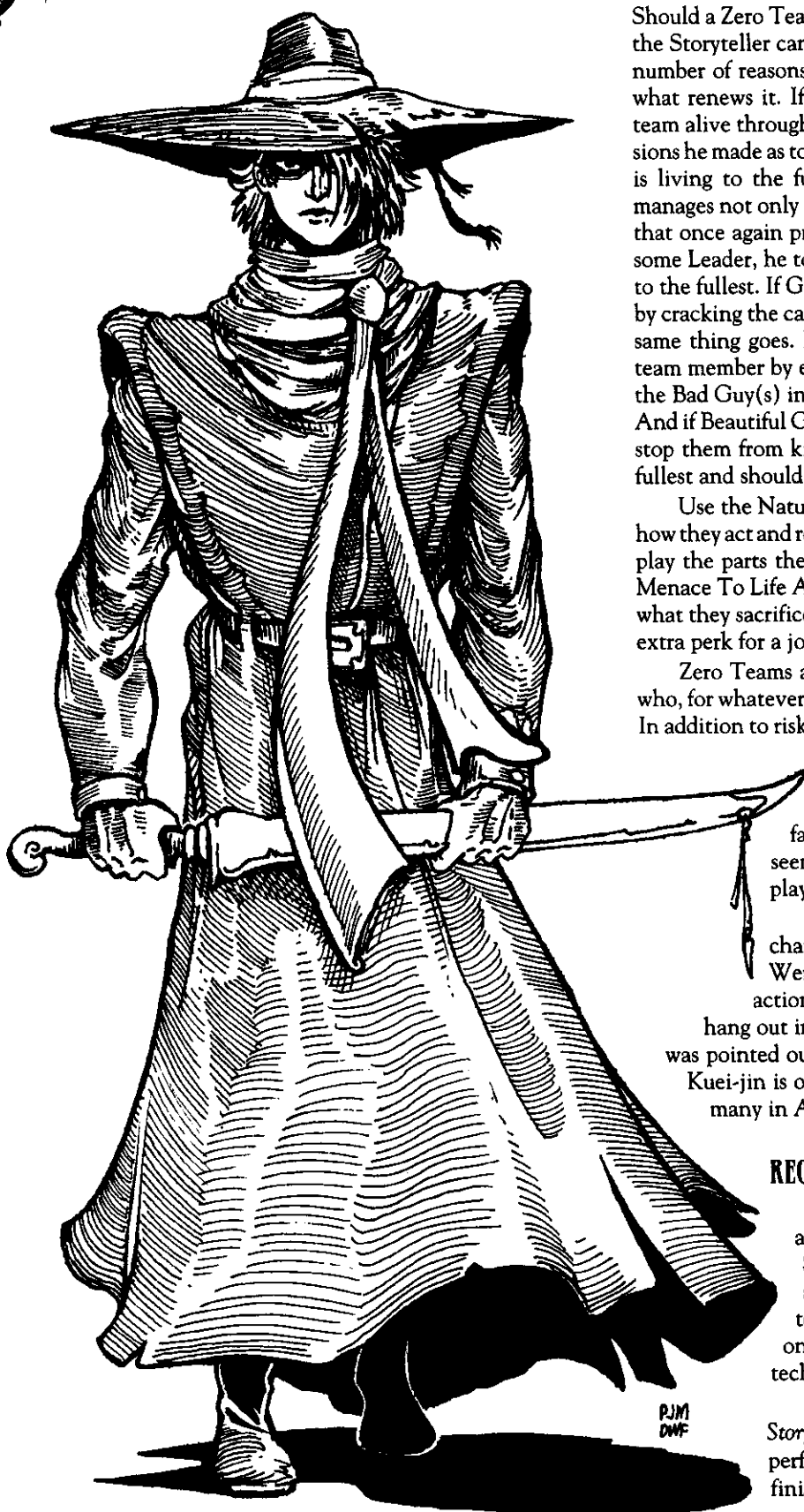
There is the Handsome Leader, who is so sparkly clean and moralistic it almost hurts to see him in action; there is the Rebel, who argues constantly with the Handsome Leader and could, one suspects, beat the snot out of the Handsome Leader if he ever set his mind to it. Despite their constant jabbering at one another, however, they work well in a team situation. The Rebel works almost to keep Leader from growing too lazy or confident. Throw into this mix the Bruiser — a large, hulking figure who seems amiable enough until circumstances piss him off, and whose loyalty is the stuff of legend. Then throw in the Geek, who is normally too skinny, a little bit of a jabbermouth and technically adept at coming up with whatever device is needed to stop the Bad Guys before it's too late.

There lie the makings of a pretty good group, but that isn't enough. No sir, because now it's time to add the reinforcing bond that holds them all together: the Beautiful Girl. Beautiful Girl always has a kind word for Bruiser and Geek, though it's understood that they haven't a chance in hell of winning her affections. She is their friend, and she gives them confidence the Handsome Leader could never hope to inspire. She is also — one can see though it's never written down — the main source of trouble between Handsome Leader and Rebel. Although she may never even kiss either one of them, it's a given that they'd face the worst flames of Hell to win her affection, and just as obvious is that she basks in the attention. No matter what either of them does, they both try to do it better and a little more impressively because Beautiful Girl might be watching.

For this reason, Rebel has withstood the desire to beat the snot out of Handsome Leader and, conversely, Handsome Leader hasn't kicked Rebel off the squad — well, that and the fact that Rebel is the best fighter in the group, and even makes Bruiser seem like sort of a wimp. But, Beautiful Girl might take his actions poorly, thus removing any chance of Rebel ever winning her affections.

The aforementioned group dynamics are just a few conventions of what has evolved over the years into modern-day anime adventures. But those very dynamics can work for the players as well as adding to the spice of an adventure.





Should a Zero Team come to resemble a gathering like this, the Storyteller can assign rewards of temporary Chi for any number of reasons. After all, Chi is life-force, and living is what renews it. If Handsome Leader manages to keep his team alive through another battle — and through the decisions he made as to how they should approach a situation, he is living to the fullest and should be rewarded. If Rebel manages not only to beat an opponent, but to do it in a way that once again proves his physical superiority over Handsome Leader, he too should be rewarded, for he is living life to the fullest. If Geek saves the day with another gadget, or by cracking the case while surfing the Internet for clues, the same thing goes. If Bruiser prevents the injury of another team member by either taking the blow himself or tackling the Bad Guy(s) in the nick of time, he should be rewarded. And if Beautiful Girl manages to keep them all together and stop them from killing each other, she is living life to the fullest and should be rewarded also.

Use the Nature and Demeanor of the characters, study how they act and react, and then use your judgment. Did they play the parts they were meant to play? Did they stop the Menace To Life As We Know It? Give them back a little of what they sacrificed in order to save the day. Consider it an extra perk for a job well done.

Zero Teams are composed primarily of outcasts: those who, for whatever reason, don't quite fit into regular society. In addition to risking life and limb with their cohorts, these people just might find their team to be the only people who accept them for who they are. They're probably as close as family in many cases, even when they don't seem to like each other very much. Reward the players who remember that.

Oh, and the same rules apply to Shih characters. Was the action tense and gritty? Were innocent people saved by the Shih's actions? Just because Shih don't traditionally hang out in groups doesn't mean they can't start. As was pointed out in *Kindred of the East*, the number of Kuei-jin is on the rise. The often-violent deaths of so many in Asia almost guarantee that.

RECOMMENDED ANIME

Here's a list of movies and cartoons to add flavor to a *Demon Hunter X* chronicle. Some are far-fetched and almost comical, some are slow-paced and extremely intense, but all are worthy for how they touch on the supernatural or the possibilities of technology gone mad.

Akira, *Chinese Ghost Story*, *Chinese Ghost Story 2* (there's a monk in this movie who is a perfect example of a Shih with a mission to finish), *Chinese Ghost Story 3*, *Peacock King*:

Spirit Warrior, *Peacock King*: *Spirit Warrior 2*, *Dirty Pair*, *3x3 Eyes*, *Supernatural Beast City*, *Legend of the Overfiend* (think of the Overfiend as a little like one of the Yama Kings and you've got the right idea), *Vampire Hunter D* (a great story and a fabulous example of a Shih on the hunt), *Animated Classics of Japanese Literature*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3 (each has at least one ghost story or monster story), *LA Blue Girl* (while oversexed and often tongue-in-cheek, each story in the series also has some interesting demons and unusual ideas for demon hunters), *Demon Beast Invasion*, *Darkside Blues* (not an exact idea for demon hunters, but wonderful for mood and visuals), *Demon City Shinjuku*, *Judge* (a great example of how the Shih deal with ghosts and the living when deciding what to do about a haunting), *Black Jack* (dark and moody stuff, with a Gothic feel), *Genocyber* (technology gone wild and the side effects), *Midnight Panther* (manga comic book with a great version of werecat assassins), and *Hades Project Zeomyr*. There are plenty more, but all of those are a good starting point.

RUNNING A DEMON HUNTER X CHRONICLE

This section deals with the nuts and bolts of constructing and running a **Demon Hunter X** chronicle. It's broken into three separate sections: the Shih, Strike Force Zero, joining forces. Each of these sections should be read carefully and altered as the Storyteller sees fit in order to make the chronicle completely fit the Storyteller's agenda. Nothing here is written in stone.

SHIH CHRONICLES

The Shih are anachronisms. They do as they do because they are driven, possessed of a passionate need to maintain their own form of order. Shih seek to preserve the balance of the Great Cycle and believe that even demons have their place in that balance. This aspect is very important in understanding the Shih and running a chronicle in which they are involved.

The fact that demons exist is perfectly fine in the Shih's collective mind; that demons prey on humans is acceptable, within reason. To the Shih, a ghost who haunts a certain house or person is not, in and of itself, a problem. But when that ghost increases the scope of the haunting or goes on a rampage against an entire community, the Shih will want an explanation — if not from the ghost, then from the people in that town.

Chronicles involving Shih should be as much about solving the mystery of why a given demon decides to misbehave as they are about stopping the aberrant behavior. There should always be a reason, and there should always be a solution. There is a certain unspoken agreement between the Shih and the *shen*. Shih follow a code of honor and behavior

when hunting demons, and in turn the demons usually do their best to avoid breaking the rules, or at least getting caught in the act.

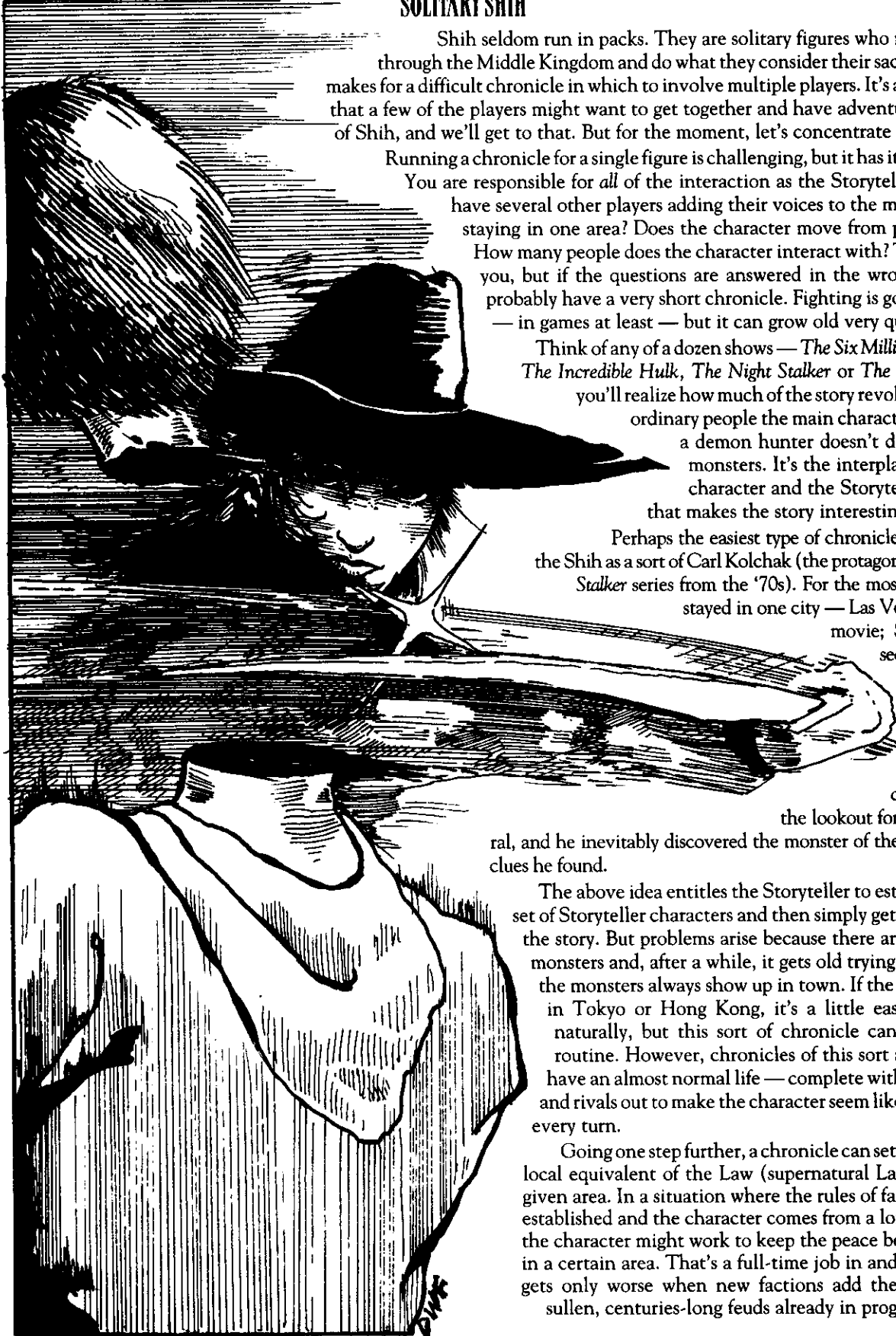
This code has nothing to do with right or wrong. The demons could, if they decided to work together, wipe Shih off the face of the Earth. But, it has to do with tradition and ritual. The Shih proved their power long ago when Yi saved the Middle Kingdom from certain destruction. Even the Kuei-jin, looking back on the situation, admit that they might have pushed the game a little too far on that occasion. For this reason along with the fact that Shih really are very dangerous individuals, the *shen* play by the unspoken rules of engagement — most of the time, at least. There are always a few who are willing to change the rules in their favor.

Mutual respect is intrinsic to Shih chronicles. The Shih respect that the *shen* have the right to exist, and the *shen* admit that from time to time one of theirs gets a little out of hand. In several cases, the *shen* have themselves tipped off a Shih to a situation that has snowballed. The Shih maintain the balance of power in a very real way and keep a certain level of neutrality between the various factions of the *shen*. The Kuei-jin and the hengeyokai are never going to be friends, and they have warred against each other in brutal combat from time to time. The Shih work as a check against these wars, because it's the humans who most often suffer the worst from the violence.

It's a mutually beneficial arrangement, and one that is never spoken of by any party. In a way, Shih are like the police in gang-ridden areas: They sometimes bust a few heads to keep the peace, or work out mutually acceptable truces between the leaders of the different gangs. But they almost never get anywhere by trying to destroy the gangs completely. It just doesn't work, because, like the police in the wrong parts of town, the Shih are far outnumbered and they know it.

Shih also bear other similarities to the police in those war-torn areas. They see so much of the bad that the good eventually loses its significance. This being the case, Shih are, or should be, rather morbid in what they find amusing. It's important that the players understand the work their characters do, and just as important that they have a good time while playing their characters. Think of *Hill Street Blues*, or even *MASH*, and you can get an inkling of what life is like for the Shih.

It's important that you, as the Storyteller, understand this odd relationship between the Shih and the *shen*. It's your job to teach the characters and their players that lesson. Threats and random violence aren't the best way for Shih to behave. It almost guarantees a short career in a job where the odds are already stacked heavily against them.



SOLITARY SHIH

Shih seldom run in packs. They are solitary figures who mostly wander through the Middle Kingdom and do what they consider their sacred duty. That makes for a difficult chronicle in which to involve multiple players. It's always possible that a few of the players might want to get together and have adventures as a group of Shih, and we'll get to that. But for the moment, let's concentrate on the loners.

Running a chronicle for a single figure is challenging, but it has its own rewards.

You are responsible for *all* of the interaction as the Storyteller. You won't have several other players adding their voices to the mix. Is the Shih staying in one area? Does the character move from place to place? How many people does the character interact with? That's all up to you, but if the questions are answered in the wrong way, you'll probably have a very short chronicle. Fighting is good in its place — in games at least — but it can grow old very quickly.

Think of any of a dozen shows — *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Night Stalker* or *The X-Files* — and you'll realize how much of the story revolves around the ordinary people the main characters meet. Even a demon hunter doesn't deal solely with monsters. It's the interplay between the character and the Storyteller characters that makes the story interesting.

Perhaps the easiest type of chronicle involves using the Shih as a sort of Carl Kolchak (the protagonist in *The Night Stalker* series from the '70s). For the most part, Kolchak stayed in one city — Las Vegas for the first movie; Seattle for the second movie, *The Night Strangler*; and Chicago for the rest of the series. Kolchak was constantly on the lookout for the supernatural, and he inevitably discovered the monster of the week from the clues he found.

The above idea entitles the Storyteller to establish a regular set of Storyteller characters and then simply get on with telling the story. But problems arise because there are only so many monsters and, after a while, it gets old trying to explain *why* the monsters always show up in town. If the chronicle is set in Tokyo or Hong Kong, it's a little easier to explain, naturally, but this sort of chronicle can easily get too routine. However, chronicles of this sort allow a Shih to have an almost normal life — complete with friends, lovers and rivals out to make the character seem like second-best at every turn.

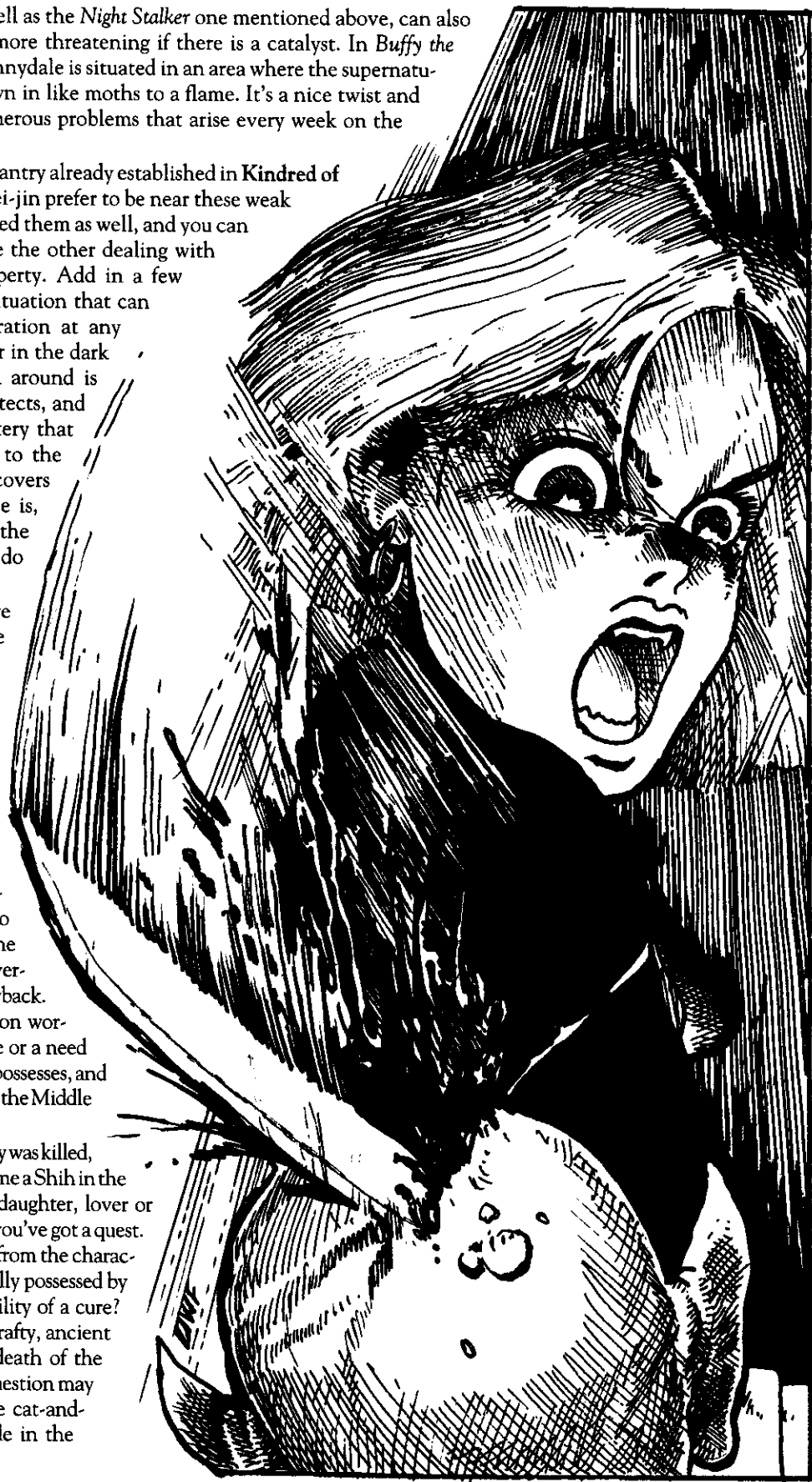
Going one step further, a chronicle can set up a Shih as the local equivalent of the Law (supernatural Law, that is) in a given area. In a situation where the rules of fair play are well-established and the character comes from a long line of Shih, the character might work to keep the peace between the *shen* in a certain area. That's a full-time job in and of itself, and it gets only worse when new factions add themselves to the sullen, centuries-long feuds already in progress.

This sort of scenario, as well as the *Night Stalker* one mentioned above, can also be altered slightly and made more threatening if there is a catalyst. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the town of Sunnydale is situated in an area where the supernatural entities are constantly drawn in like moths to a flame. It's a nice twist and works well to explain the numerous problems that arise every week on the show.

You have a similar unpleasantry already established in *Kindred of the East*: the dragon nests. Kuei-jin prefer to be near these weak spots, and hengeyokai often need them as well, and you can bet the two factions don't like the other dealing with what they consider their property. Add in a few other *shen*, and you've got a situation that can erupt into a volatile conflagration at any time. Leave the Shih character in the dark about why every supernatural around is interested in the town she protects, and you've got an underlying mystery that can add quite a bit of flavor to the situation. Even if the Shih discovers what the source of the trouble is, she still has to figure out where the dragon nest is and what to do about it.

The other main alternative for a solo chronicle is that of the renegade or wanderer. *The Incredible Hulk*, *Highlander*, *The Phoenix*, *Star Man*, *The Fugitive* and a dozen or so other shows have all used the concept of a solitary figure or small group of characters who are on the run from, or seeking to find, something. What they are running from could be a misguided law-enforcement agency trying to capture the character for a crime he didn't commit, or a criminal overlord who's decided it's time for payback. Make the pursuer a cult of demon worshippers with a thirst for revenge or a need for some trait only the character possesses, and you can easily fit this concept into the Middle Kingdom.

Perhaps the character's family was killed, which led to the decision to become a Shih in the first place. But throw in a son, daughter, lover or spouse who resurfaces later, and you've got a quest. Is the family member on the run from the character willingly? Is this person actually possessed by a demon? If so, is there a possibility of a cure? Perhaps the character is after a crafty, ancient *shen* who's responsible for the death of the character's family. The *shen* in question may be influential and thrive on the cat-and-mouse game, or it may fear little in the



world save the weapon the character carries. The variations are almost limitless.

The natural setback of this concept is that the Storyteller is stuck generating a large number of Storyteller characters and new locations for each adventure in the chronicle. But it can certainly make for some interesting interactions. Remember that werewolf with the scar over the socket where his left eye was? Yeah, the one your character cut out? Well, congratulations, he found you, and this time he brought friends. Maybe, if you're fast and lucky, you can get together with that mysterious monk who said he owed you one for saving his life. Can you make it back before ol' Scarface reaches you...?

MULTIPLE-PLAYER CHRONICLES

Shih are solitary by nature. Not because they are antisocial people — though years of demon hunting has certainly made antisocial pariahs — but because they are *always* keep alert and defend themselves. Most Shih see a potential disaster in taking a lover, let alone a family. They tend to look for kinks in the Shih's armor, and a lover is a very easy kink to access. It's damned hard to think of how best to defeat a demon capable of lifting a truck with those same power hands and wrapped around your friend's throat.

Still, the Middle Kingdom can be a lonely place when one's main source of conversation is the demon form of the demons one has to slay in line. For that reason, despite the fact that Shih are naturally solitary, they have a sense for small groups. When they gather together, the problem with these gatherings is that Shih are not used to means tougher monsters, more numbers of demons, and the Storyteller's choice.

Multiple-player Shih chronicles suffer from the same weaknesses as their SF0 counterparts: It's hard to remain unnoticed when you gather together in numbers, and a path of devastation wherever you go. A monster who just might be somebody's mother, father, or somebody who has influences in the local region. It's hard to remain unnoticed. old Mi Chang, who stood all of 5'1", was also the most powerful furred monster that ate five townspeople, especially if she was nice to almost everyone and her son is the mayor. The mayor might know the truth, but odds are that he won't share the facts when he wants revenge for what the characters did to his loving mother.

A solitary character, confronted with the aftereffects of monster-slaying, might just slip away into the night, never to be seen again. But a group of people is likely to travel a little slower and look out for each other when the going gets tough.

The same difficulties that exist for solitary Shih exist for a group of Shih. The difference is that the problems are multiplied. One of them is wanted for murder? Now the others are associating with a known felon. One of the characters pissed off a Yama King a few years back and now that demon lord wants revenge? Now they all have a problem with the Yama King. Then there's the problem of securing food and shelter for five

instead of one. Even entering certain parts of town might pose a problem. One shady, seedy character coming into Okinawa's biggest city could go relatively unheralded, but five of them are going to attract undesired attention. And then there's that worst-case scenario, in which one Shih has befriended a seemingly pleasant enough *shen* who just happens to have killed another group member's wife and kids.

Perhaps the most serious drawback, at least as far the characters should be concerned, is that by joining together in groups, they remove some of the respect the Shih have earned from the *shen* over the centuries. A solitary mortal, doing what he must to enforce a code of ethics, is worthy of respect in the eyes of the demons. A group of humans, by contrast, resembles a gang of punks. It's easy to demand that the *shen* follow the rules when outnumbered. That may not seem like much, but the demons are just as likely to take the gang's behavior as a sign of weakness as they are to take it as a sign of strength. That old Army adage says: "Respect must be commanded, it is not to be demanded."

STRIKE FORCE ZERO CHRONICLES

Strike Force Zero chronicles are an entirely different set of problems. The SF0 agents hunt the Shih, and there are two types of chronicles

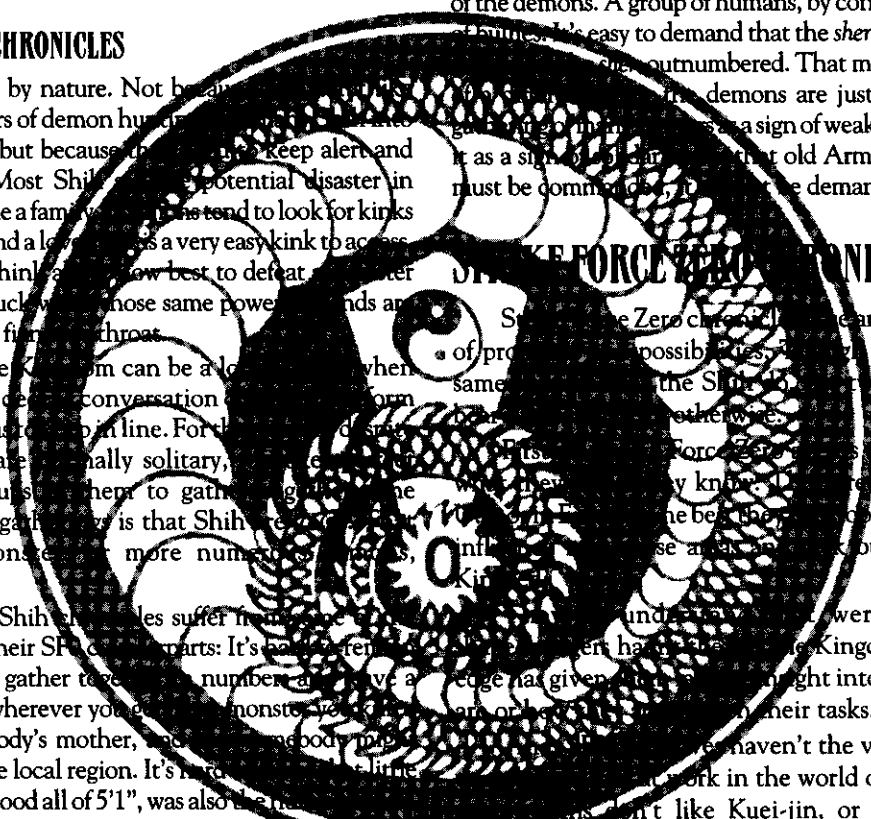
Strike Force Zero agents don't know a tenth of what they know. They aren't very active in the Middle Kingdom. The best they can do for is to expand their knowledge of these areas and pick out one or two of the

understand the werewolves and other creatures that live in the Middle Kingdom. But that knowledge has given them a slight insight into what these creatures are capable of in their tasks.

Strike Force Zero haven't the vaguest clue about the world of the supernatural — they don't like Kuei-jin, or that Kuei-jin loathe werewolves, are all unknown factors to the Strike Force. Their primary source of information about the supernatural lies in the few fragments of information they find scattered in the substantial (but mostly untranslated) library of books in their vaults.

The Force's agents are, in short, dangerously ignorant. Their only saving grace comes from their secret benefactors, who take every opportunity to learn as much as they can, and who've made an art form of torturing information from the more reluctant "guests" of the Strike Force.

Beginning characters in the Force should know nothing at all about what they are to face. What they learn should come from trial and error, with a liberal amount of false information scattered throughout. That werewolves exist is one thing, but knowing how many shapes they can



All of these possibilities are mentioned because you, as the Storyteller, have to help the players find a method of learning. They have abilities; now they need direction. Just which way is the chronicle going to evolve? Are the agents out to protect Asia from the aberrant forces of evil? Are they seeking a root cause for the dark forces hiding in the shadows of society? What, exactly, do the characters seek to do?

One approach you can take is the development approach. Let the characters in the creations designed by Stephen King and Zero's scientists. Let them work toward finding a cure for the troubled souls suffering from what must be a variety of strange diseases. How far would our characters go with the knowledge that werewolves already are a common sight? Might they find a way to eliminate the genetic "virus" and nullify its detrimental effects? Let the characters do their best, but be prepared for the consequences that if they *do* find a cure for the disease of lycanthropy, the cure work on a one-of-a-kind basis? Can it be spread into the air as a retrovirus that eliminates the virus of all the more werewolves in the world? Does it leave any of the terrible parties alive, or does it leave behind the bodies of people who died a slow, agonizing death without the "antidote"?

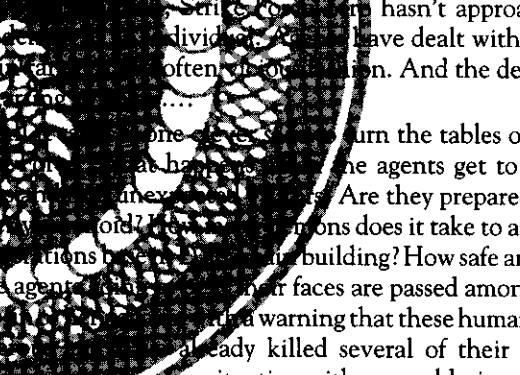
And then, how will these characters deal with the knowledge once they have it? They've developed a virus that can cure lycanthropy but they've acquired, in the process, a creature where a person stood before. They can't not want to use that cure. The Zaibatsu, of course, has no such moral qualms.

Imagine a situation in which the characters are examining a small town suffering from a strange ailment. After some extensive research, they discover that the deadly Antimutation retrovirus they created is responsible for a dozen or more hideous deaths, and that it somehow was taken from under their noses and employed in what was apparently a field test. How would the characters react, especially if they discovered their "cure" also killed the werewolves' innocent relatives who shared that lycanthropy gene in a dormant state?

Such a situation might require a closer look at the forces behind the scenes in Strike Force Zero, and that could lead to a confrontation with the Zaibatsu. Just as

That's just one scenario; there are many others. The less the characters know, the more interesting the ideas they might come up with for eradicating or studying a problem.

Strike Force Zero specializes in infiltration as a means of discovering the whereabouts of their enemies. The groups they join normally are disreputable and foul. Just how far is a character willing to go to keep her cover intact? Triads, tongs, and even covert government operations from other nations are conceivable targets of infiltration. The rules of the game are especially in such situations, as agents are typically eliminated on the event of exposure. If a member of the team blows his cover, what will other members of the Zero Team go to protect him? The answer might vary greatly, depending on how fast and how often the characters have gotten into trouble. Especially if they're finally on their target in their sights.

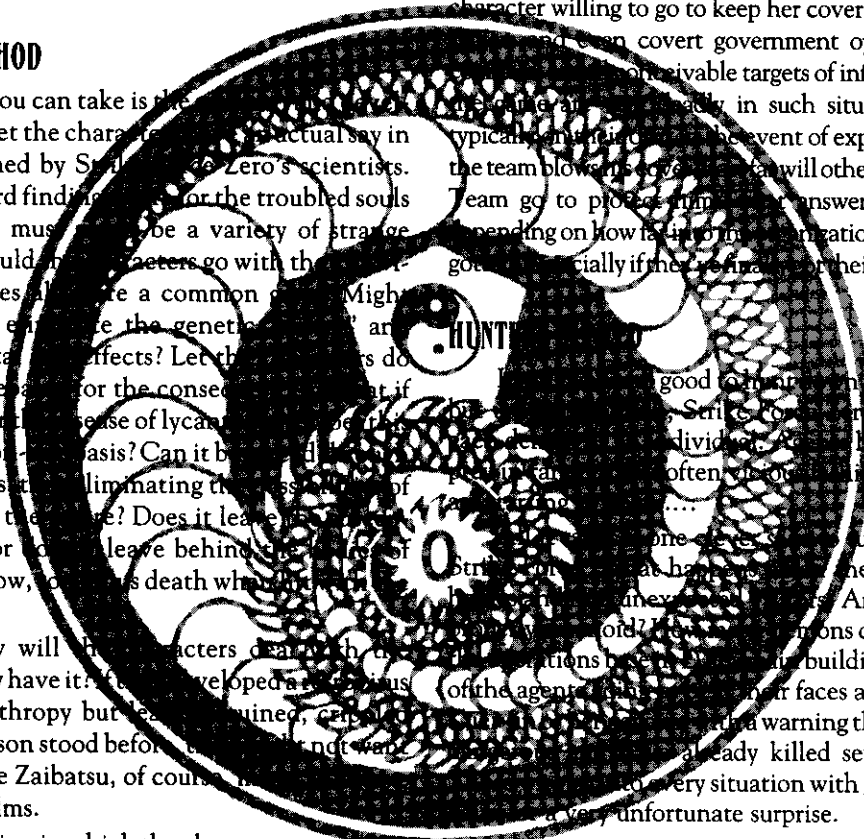


...good to know you're in and capture demons,
 ...the Strike Corps hasn't approached
 ...individuals. Agents have dealt with their
 ...often via observation. And the demons

 ...one day. You'll turn the tables on the
 ...Strike Corps. That happens when the agents get to their
 ...inexorable powers. Are they prepared and
 ...old? How long does it take to assault
 ...operations base in the main building? How safe are any
 ...of the agents? When their faces are passed among the
 ...with a warning that these humans are
 ...already killed several of their kind?
 ...to every situation with guns a-blazing might
 ...a very unfortunate surprise.

It's one thing to hunt demons, and sometimes be hunted by them, but what happens when you begin to notice patterns? Why would a werewolf, a vampire and a changeling all wear the same medallion somewhere on their person? It could be a similar taste in fashions, or it could be a cult.

Who's going around meticulously, surgically removing the hearts of their victims, then leaving a blend of herbs in the cavity where the organ used to rest? How many sacrifices does it take to summon a Yama King? What has that powerful entity promised in return? Strike Force Zero has already stopped one major attempt to bring a demon lord to this world. Were there a few stragglers who got away, who just might try it again? There's also the possibility of raw vengeance. Stop a major attempt to free a Yama King, or kill enough of its minions, and you'll likely get some very unwanted attention.



GHOST CITY

From time to time, ghosts make their presence known, as they have for centuries. Lately, though, activity among the Restless Dead has been increasing. And signs indicate that it's going to keep getting worse. Something has weakened the Wall between the worlds, and it is aggressive. Why are the Dead acting the way they are? Why are buildings decaying steadily, even when they only just opened to the public? Why is almost everyone in the city suffering from a lack of sleep?

WAR AMONG THE SHEN

In recent months, violence has increased tremendously. Gang wars are breaking out sporadically, and innocent people are dying. The police can't seem to stop the mobs, and several of the best riot squads around have been thwarted or killed outright. Martial law is being seriously considered, and the new curfew for sunset seems like a good idea, but many disgruntled citizens ignore the rules and go out anyway. The police are starting to talk about gang members with claws and trained attack dogs, and a few are almost certain they've seen nightmarish shapes lurking in the darkness, eyeing them hungrily.

Something has gone wrong in the city, and the Zero Team needs to make it right again. But where do they start when they don't have any idea about the workings of the

supernatural societies? For every demon they fight, two more seem to pop up, and the odds are definitely mounting against the Zero Team.

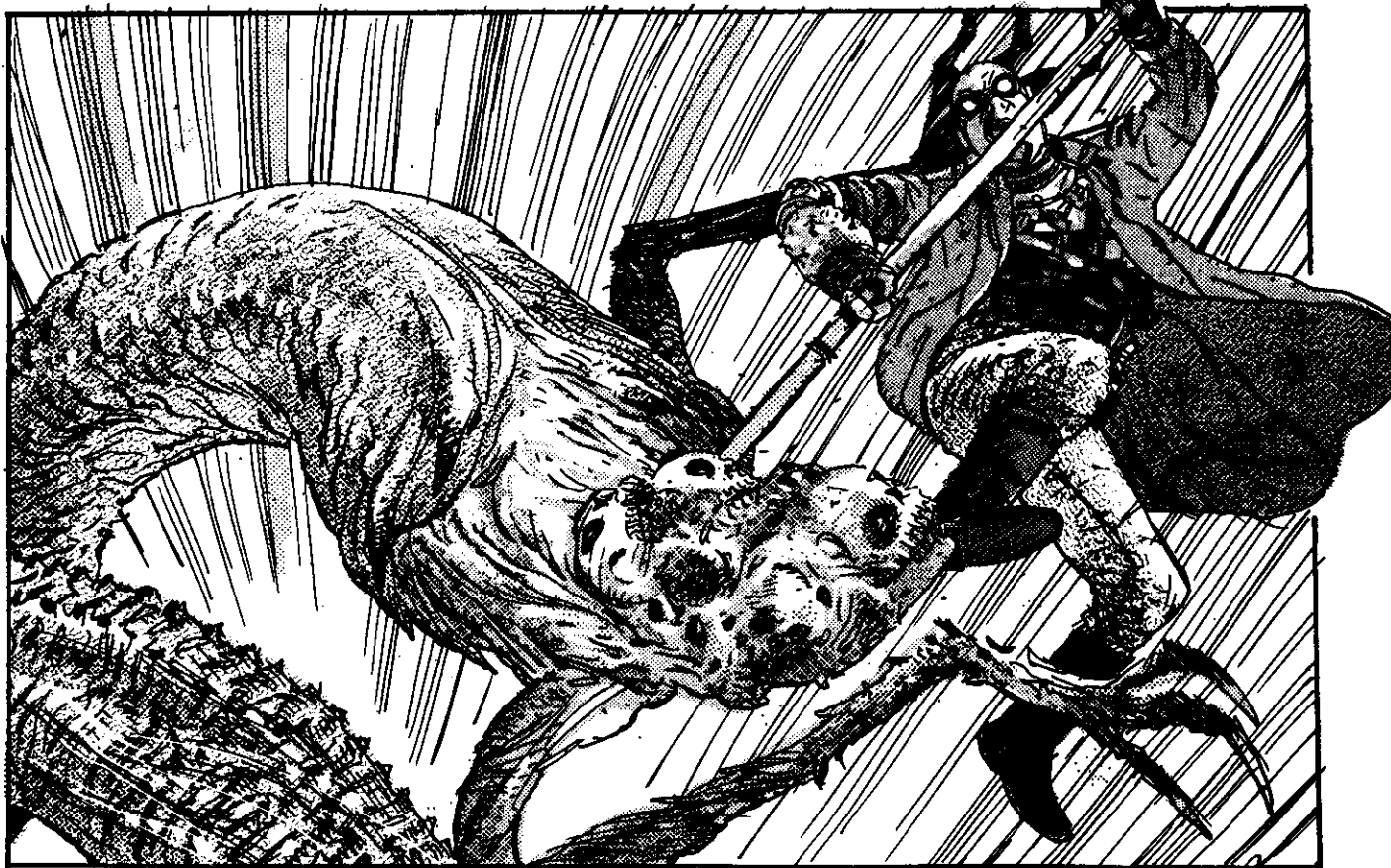
WHO WAS THAT?

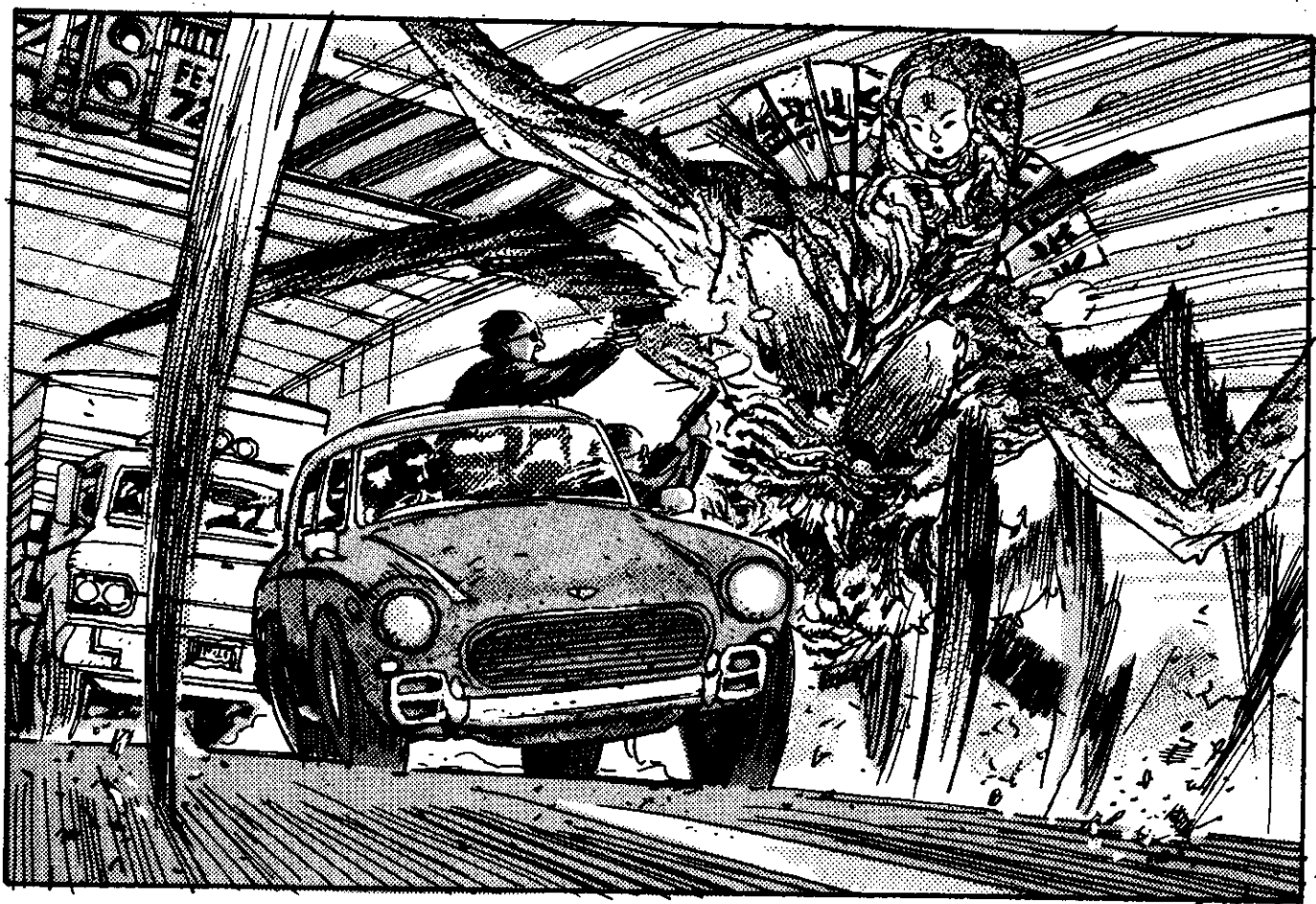
New faces are appearing at Strike Force Headquarters. These strangers aren't overly friendly, and they've got Director Okamoto sweating a lot. All of the old familiar faces are still around, but they seem preoccupied, stressed out. Who are the newcomers? What do they want? Why is Okamoto so worried?

MIXING DEMON HUNTERS

The Shih and Strike Force Zero are, more or less, strangers to one another. They've met a time or two, but they have nothing in common save a shared foe. Shih look at the Strike Force as a dangerous new element in an already volatile mixture. SF0 doesn't know quite what to make of the enigmatic strangers with the attitude problem and enough skill to take on several men in a fair fight.

They aren't even very certain they're fighting for the same goals. The Shih are traditionalists with a long history of doing what they do. The Strike Force





is still new and experimenting in how best to accomplish its goals. Shih believe *shen* have every right to exist, just as the animals, plants and humans do. The Strike Force wants to remove the *shen* from the face of the world, using any means that works. The Shih have an understanding with the *shen*, while the Strike Force hasn't really been noticed by them...yet.

This status quo can — and probably will — change, but don't expect pleasant integration. If players want both Shih warriors and Strike Force agents together in a chronicle, there's nothing wrong with that, so long as the Storyteller agrees. But expect fireworks. They'll happen, or at least they should. You're dealing with more than a difference in how to hunt monsters, you're dealing with different ideologies.

Getting the two together for a conflict is easy. Virtually all of the story ideas listed for the Strike Force can be easily adapted to work with Shih. The only challenge is making sure everyone gets equal playtime, and making certain they learn about each other the hard way. No one in the Strike Force would consider turning to a person of dubious grooming habits and mental health for advice, or accept her, without a test of some sort. The Shih might concede that having a little extra firepower around could be useful, but they won't be willing to share information with the Strike Team because the agents haven't proved their staying power.

The Force could theoretically take on a Shih as a member, but the same problem arises — Shih think the Strike Force is run by amateurs. A Shih almost certainly won't fit in, and Strike Force Zero's regulations and protocol could cause the Shih to leave even if he can tolerate the ignorance around him.

There are ways to have the two groups interact, but as an ongoing chronicle, the tale needs to be set in one area, and it's best to work with the idea of a Yama King or other overlord leading the forces of the demons. While that makes for an interesting concept, there's a very serious problem with game balance if the foes of the demon hunters are too strong or too weak.

As Storyteller, use whatever factors work to your advantage. Perhaps a psychic on the Strike Force becomes convinced that the street bum with the sword is necessary to solve a growing threat, while the Shih sees a bit of potential in one or two of the SFO agents. It could be that both of the demon-hunter factions have a similar foe they seek to find.

The only limit is what you, the Storyteller, allow into your chronicle. It takes extra work on your part to have both groups of demon hunters working in the same area at the same time, but the added tensions and possibilities make the effort worth your while.





APPENDIX

THE POWERS THAT BE: THE MOST INFLUENTIAL DEMON HUNTERS

Every age produces people who influence their peers. In some cases they lead by choice; in others, they seem almost predestined to lead...whether or not they have the desire.

The leaders of the Shih are not conscious of their command, or if they are, they choose to ignore the fact. Still, they are there, the ones spoken of in awed whispers and the ones who are almost always present when the greatest demons come forth.



THE GOD SLAYER

There is a power among the Shih, an awesome and terrible power that chooses to reveal itself from time to time. Several times in the course of the greatest battles to save humanity from the *shen*, a figure has joined the Shih in bloody, glorious combat. The stories agree that the figure is human, but beyond that the details blur.

Four centuries ago, when the demon Mu Tong Pok gathered an army of 1,000,000 demon soldiers and prepared to destroy the Forbidden City, the stranger appeared to aid the four Shih and 10,000 mortal soldiers who gathered to do battle against them. Some claim the ensuing war was waged in the Middle Kingdom, while others believe it happened in the spirit worlds. In either case, battle was joined, and when it had ended, the great demon army lay in ruin and the four Shih still stood, bloody and weary beyond their years, but alive. With them stood seven other men and the one called the God Slayer.

The God Slayer never spoke throughout the combat. Though he was cut a hundred or more times, he remained eerily silent. With but a gesture from his hands, the God Slayer cast arrows like lightning bolts and crushed waves of the demon hordes. His great, silvery sword sliced through stone and demon-flesh with equal ease, and his spear carried hundreds of demons up to the sun, where they burned in hellish conflagrations, only to return to his hand for another casting. The fields where once the Kun Lun Mountains stood ran red with oceans of blood, and the skies cried with thunderous rage throughout the confrontation. When it was done, the Shih themselves had to fight Mu Tong Pok. He fell before their blades, though he rose again later and freed

himself from the prison they built to hold his remains. The God Slayer would not, or could not, interfere in that final battle.

As they placed the last stones upon the dead demon, the God Slayer walked across the strewn corpses of thousands, never looking back as he walked into the West. The God Slayer has not been seen since, unless the rumors of him walking away from the atomic fires at Nagasaki are true. Still, the Shih believe he roams the world yet, preparing for the Age of Sorrow. Like all Shih, he walks alone.

Some Shih claim the God Slayer bears a third eye upon his brow. Others are certain he is one of the Kuei-jin, who fights beside the Shih in honor of what he once was. Some claim he is Yi himself, returned from the dead in the Shih's time of need; others believe the God Slayer is dead, waiting to rise from his silent tomb when he is needed again. Wherever he might be, the Shih believe in him, and many believe he will rise again to lead the Shih during the final battle with the Demon Emperor.

MISTER KOMODO

Mister Komodo is a venerable warrior of the Shih. His long, greasy hair is darkest black, peppered with silver. His face is unshaven, and the clothes he wears, so the tales go, are older than most of the monsters he battles.

Mister Komodo walks the Land of the Rising Sun, bearing only his weapons and a bottle of plum wine as he travels. He is never seen without the great, floppy hat he wears to protect him from bright days and rainy nights. He carries a great number of archaic weapons, a katana, dai-kyu and shuriken among them. He is often seen in and around airports, where he claims to wait for foolish Kin-jin and lightning wizards from other lands. Despite the numerous weapons he carries, no one ever questions his right to be



there, or his right to carry his arsenal. Some Shih claim that he has never been defeated in combat, and most who have seen him fight have no doubt the claims are true.

Mister Komodo is known as one of the greatest Shih, and one of their heaviest drinkers as well. It's said he has the blood of dragons and the heart of a tiger. It's also said Komodo always smiles, especially when he prepares for a fight. Mister Komodo has been seen speaking with many *shen*, often treating them to a flurry of bad jokes and a pleasant meal when he passes through their domains. He knows almost everyone, and claims to have a perfect memory for faces — a fact that unsettles most Shih, who swear they've never seen him before, though he often smiles and asks after friends or family members when he meets them for what they believe is the first time.

THE CHEN CHIH

The man called the Chen Chih (Judge of Dust) is believed dead. Still, for a dead man, he seems to get around. He hunts the worst of the worst, often targeting Cathayans. He always carries through on his threats of retribution, no matter how preposterous.

Perhaps the name Chen Chih is fitting, as there is no doubt that he feasts upon the remains of his enemies, apparently content to take what he can get from his victims by way of nutrition.

The Chen Chih is not respected by the *shen*, he is feared. Many believe he is Kuei-jin, and that he chooses to feed on his own kind a way of gaining the energies he needs to survive. The police have captured the Chen Chih several times, but he has always managed to escape from them. The criminal underworld from Siberia to Jakarta has a price on his head. He has, according to the stories told of him, destroyed no fewer than 12 criminal empires single-handedly. This last is most likely a gross exaggeration.

The Chen Chih is unnaturally thin, and there are claims that his flesh sloughs off with sickening ease. The Shih who've met the Chen Chih speak little of him, either for fear he'll find out about the conversations or because what they saw bothered them profoundly.



STRIKE FORCE ZERO: THOSE IN POWER

Strike Force Zero is a very organized group, and everyone knows who is truly in command. First and foremost is Geichin Okamoto, the president of DTI and founder of Strike Force Zero. Okamoto is, despite the numerous obstacles in his way, the main reason for Strike Force Zero's existence and continued success. Despite constant pressure put on the man by government opposition to his group and his dream, Okamoto perseveres.

GEICHIN OKAMOTO

Okamoto is in his 70s, but still looks like a man in his 50s. He is slim, muscular and light on his feet. His most distinguishing features are his penetrating black eyes, and the long scar running across the back of his neck and down his left shoulder blade to just above his buttocks — a gift from the Tengu who captured him in his youth. Every person who meets Okamoto assumes two things automatically: one, that he is a very shrewd man; and two, that he is a very dangerous man to have angry with you. Such observers are completely accurate on both counts.

Okamoto runs SFO from an office filled with paraphernalia, gathered over his years in the field and from more recent incidents involving the Strike Force. All of the odd statuary, weapons and masks adorning his office are artifacts of power, and most would be worth a fortune to the right *shen*.

Of all the trophies in his office, the one Okamoto holds in highest regard is the skull of an odd creature, part man and part bird if the skull's shape reveals anything. This skull is preserved in a heavy Lucite block, and rests on his desk, within easy reach. When making a point in an argument, Okamoto often rests his hand on the oddity, running his fingers over the area of the beak where a scar is plainly visible.

Okamoto is friendly to all his underlings, but remains aloof. While he knows everyone and often calls them by their first names, he expects to be called Mr. Okamoto or simply "sir."

Okamoto has made a point of participating in the actual training process of each member of the Strike Force, and is a master in the martial arts as well as in espionage. Certain agents still tell tales of Okamoto defeating a Kuei-jin in hand-to-hand combat, though he never comments on this tale himself.

Okamoto has only one soft point in his armor: Rei Hironama, his wife. Around her he is like a young man, trying to impress the girl of his dreams.

REI HIRONAMA

Rei Hironama is one of those women men often refer to as "handsome." She is attractive, statuesque and precise in her movements. While she is not openly arrogant, she, like her husband, tends to remain aloof. Her smiles are infrequent, and her orders are spoken softly. Those who know her never make her repeat a command.

Despite her impeccable, formal style of dress, she's been known to lend a hand in a few fights when the need arises. Rei's ability to cause grievous injury to her opponents is well documented.

Hironama is the leader of the scientific research branch of DTI and Strike Force Zero. She is almost as responsible for the success of the Strike Force as her husband is, and she can draw the schematics of any weapon employed by the Strike Teams without consulting any form of note or illustration. While she seldom actually works in the research and

development of new technology, she is always kept up to date on new devices being field-tested, and often suggests the initial ideas and design specifications for the works in progress.

Whenever there's a chance that an agent has been "infected" by a supernatural source, it's Hironama's duty to debrief the agent and discern whether the agent now poses a threat to the agency as a whole and the Strike Team as a unit.

There are rumors that Hironama is not only a phenomenal scientist, but that she is capable of reading minds. This rumor is never mentioned in front of her or her husband, at least by anyone who knows how both of them react to such stories.

YOSHI ITO

Yoshi Ito is Okamoto's personal secretary and the person most likely to speak with a Strike Team both before and after they receive a new assignment. Ito is short, slightly heavy, and bespectacled. He is also an Olympic-level marksman and one of the most influential men in the Japanese business world. If there is someone Ito doesn't know, then that someone isn't worth knowing, at least as far as business transactions go.

Ito is available at all hours of the day or night if a Strike Team agent needs to talk to someone about a situation or report suspicions about a team member. He is discreet, polite, and very good at reading subtle conversational signals. Very few people who know Ito would ever consider him soft, despite his love of good food and his passion for rockabilly music. As often as not, Ito is the only person in the executive branch of the Strike Force who'll be seen in blue jeans and a T-shirt.





HUAN VO

Huan Vo is a Vietnamese refugee to Japan. He is also one of the brightest minds on the planet when it comes to computers and nanotechnology. Vo is known for his acid tongue, his lewd comments and his inability to remain clean for more than a few moments. When Vo is away from his labs, he is a walking calamity. If there's a stain to be found, it's likely Vo will find it. Inside his labs, he is meticulous and cautious to the point of obsessiveness. The tall, lanky man is maniacal about his wetware; he often stops agents he encounters to see if the equipment he designed is working as well as it should, and to determine if the agents have abused his creations.

Vo is also the man responsible for maintaining the computer networks at Strike Force Zero and the person to whom everyone answers for breaches of security. His fits of rage are legendary, and nothing to be scoffed at. Very few agents forget that Huan Vo created many of the devices they employ, and that he's as responsible for the safety of each agent as he is for the safety of SFO headquarters.

WEAPONS OF LEGEND AND POWER

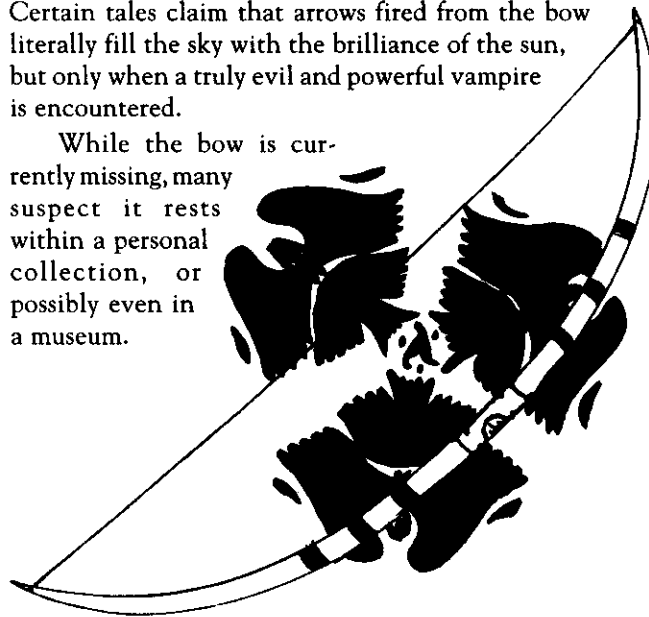
The Shih have always been, deep in their hearts, traditionalists. Many of the weapons used by modern demon hunters were carried hundreds or thousands of years ago by their predecessors.

Interestingly, many of these weapons have, over centuries, developed a taste for the blood of the *shen*. Perhaps it is the use of these weapons as focuses for the Shih's Qiao, perhaps it is the very blood of the creatures they've destroyed, but something has altered these weapons. Once they've found the "flavor" of *shen* they like best, they simply work more efficiently against those demons.

THE BOW OF YI

The Bow of the Excellent Archer looks, on the surface, rather ordinary. It is graceful in design and has weathered the centuries remarkably well, but there is nothing about it that cries out for attention. It has not been seen for centuries, but tales of its periodic emergence circulate among the Shih. The ancient bow is sturdy, the tales say, and requires a great deal of strength to pull and aim, but once an arrow has left its grasp, it always flies true — almost as if Yi himself were guiding the missile. Certain tales claim that arrows fired from the bow literally fill the sky with the brilliance of the sun, but only when a truly evil and powerful vampire is encountered.

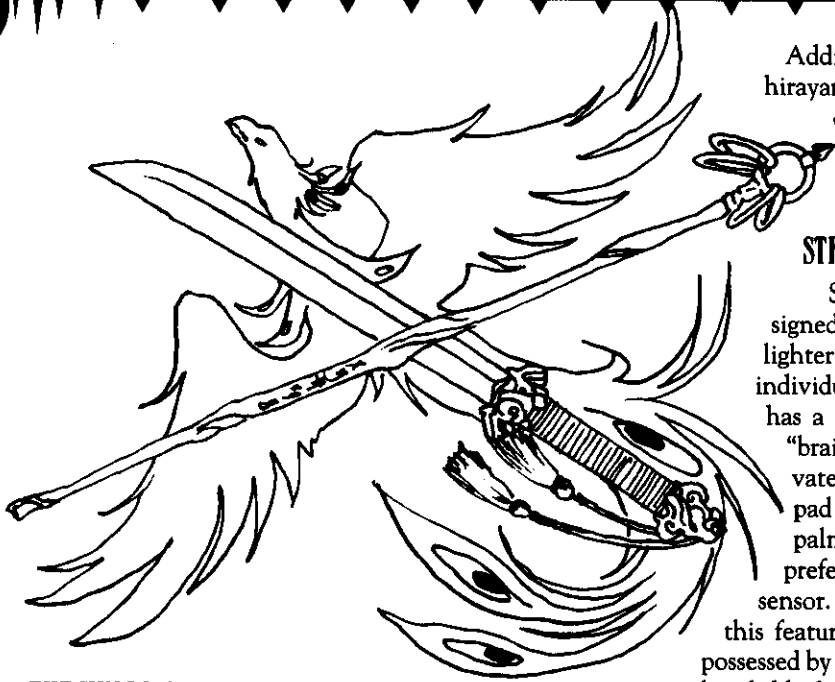
While the bow is currently missing, many suspect it rests within a personal collection, or possibly even in a museum.



THE STAFF OF SHING TSE LEE

Shing Tse Lee was one of the first true Shih to leave the Celestial Army. All he took with him was a loaf of bread, a particularly enlightening *kaja* manuscript, and the staff he'd carved from a tree near the fortress at Kun Lun. The bread was eaten, the manuscript lost, but the staff — a stout walking stick with several rings mounted to its top — endures.

Shing Tse Lee's staff is a solid weapon, but against hungry ghosts it is devastating. The staff literally steals their essence with every strike, ripping a part of the ghost away for all time and leaving the wraith in eternal agony. Certain stories claim that the staff has swallowed thousands of restless spirits, though there is no proof. One of the oldest legends of Shing Tse Lee claims that he used his staff in anger once, shortly after Kun Lun vanished from the face of the earth. The tale states that Shing used the staff to strike down one of the Yama Kings — Pi Bien Wang, the King of the Hell of Whips — who has not been heard from since.



THE SWORD OF SHU MO PAN

Shu Mo Pan was the great-granddaughter of Yi, and one of the Shih's finest warriors. According to most tales she lived to the unusual age of 97 before meeting her death at the hands of a weretiger. The sword she carried was used frequently in her fights against the hengeyokai.

Shu Mo Pan's sword actually defends its bearer from attacks by hengeyokai, moving with amazing speed to block attacks. The sword also cuts deeply into Changing Breed flesh, causing aggravated wounds. It is currently in the hands of a Japanese demon hunter who does what he can to keep the peace in Tokyo.

THE FANS OF MA YI YUAN

Ma Yi Yuan was certainly an exceptional Shih. Despite her years as a demon hunter, she lived in the high society of the Song Dynasty. There, while serving as the wife of a minor noble, Ma Yi Yuan was frequently sought after, both for social events and by nobles who had troubles with the *shen*.

Naturally, few people — or demons — expected Ma Yi Yuan to be as resourceful as she was. Many demons whom she defeated never realized — until too late — that the two fans she carried were her primary weapons. Exceedingly deft in their use, Ma Yi Yuan managed to dispose of many threats to the safety of the nobles in her area.

The fans are deceptively lethal weapons. These thin metallic folding fans are razor sharp and as strong as the finest sword blade. Beneath the elaborate decorations of the fans lies a great deal of mystic power, as well as a hunger for the blood of the *hirayanu*. The user of the fans can deflect any spells cast by the fae, and is able to step into their realm upon occasion, if the situation is dire enough and warrants this violation of the realm.

Additionally, the fans have the same effect on the *hirayanu* that they have on mortals. Changelings are dazzled by the fans, and after a short time begin to forget precisely who wielded them, as well as any events surrounding that person.

STRIKER GUN

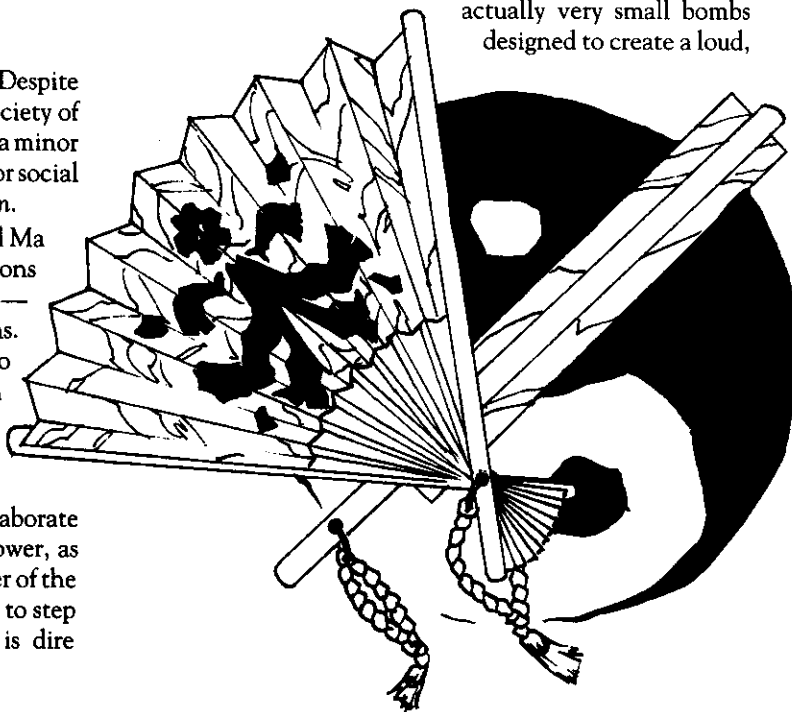
SFO's signature weapon, striker guns, are designed to look like regular heavy pistols, but they are lighter, stronger, and designed to be used only by the individual to whom they are attuned. Each striker gun has a small device in the grip, which works as the "brain" for the pistol. If this sensor pad is not activated, the pistol itself won't function. Each sensor pad has a mate which is implanted in the wielder's palms — left, right or both depending on the user's preference — which functions as the starter for the sensor. Aside from the standard security this allows, this feature also warns of potential danger. Any agent possessed by a spirit will not be able to use the striker, as the bio-field of the agent is altered during possession.

Note: While possessed agents can't use the striker, an agent whose mind has been dominated by an outside force is not unduly altered by the effect. A vampire can still make use of an agent as a pawn in this way.

STRIKER AMMUNITION

- Standard-issue bullets: Work just as well and efficiently as a .44 Magnum bullet. See the accompanying chart.
- Silver bullets: Work as standard-issue, but cause aggravated damage to certain entities.

• Sounders: Sounders are actually very small bombs designed to create a loud,





piercing noise, loud enough to cause injury to sensitive ears. When used on dogs, werewolves, Kuei-jin, Kindred with Heightened Senses, and other creatures with hearing ranges far beyond human, they cause pain and temporary deafness. Sounders work within a 20-foot radius of impact and are as inaudible to humans as a dog whistle.

When a sounder is discharged, the attacker must roll to hit, but because precise aiming is not required, the difficulty to hit is only 4. Once the target is struck, the player rolls eight dice against a difficulty of the target's Stamina +3. For each success, the target is deafened for one turn and loses three dice from all Dexterity pools as a result of dizziness caused by damage to the inner ear. Any creature using sonarlike abilities to see is effectively blinded for the duration of the assault. This bullet causes no other injury. If more than one bullet is fired, the effects are cumulative.

- **Tracker bullets:** Tracker bullets cause only half the damage of a standard-issue shell (roll the same dice and halve the damage, rounding up). However if any damage at all gets through, the bullet inserts a very small intramuscular tracking device. This device has a range of 100 miles and is impossible to detect by normal means. The tracking agent itself is an amalgam of organic materials and nanites, and is otherwise completely harmless. Normal immune system take no notice of the tracking beacon, but Kuei-jin's bodies will reject the devices within 24 hours.

- **Ectoplasmic Disruptors:** These bullets are wonders of technology, designed to track a wraith's ectoplasmic energies (Corpus). When a wraith is located, these bullets home in on the closest ectoplasmic trail. When they reach the center of the energy field, they explode in a wave of energy designed specifically to cause injury to the wraith. Living beings are unharmed, though humans with Humanity ratings of 5 or below may sustain headaches from the radiation. Against wraiths, ectoplasmic disruptors inflict five dice of damage.

- **Rubber Bullets:** Rubber bullets cause the same damage as standard-issue bullets, but the damage inflicted does not cause aggravated wounds, even to humans. This damage is kinetic only and causes no penetration. It's still possible to kill someone with a rubber bullet, but it's far more difficult. Anyone reduced to Incapacitated with one of these weapons is effectively knocked unconscious and will recover in a few hours. All creatures may soak the damage caused by a rubber bullet.

Every SFO agent is issued a striker gun. The agent is also given four clips of standard-issue ammunition (16 rounds per clip) and 1 clip of each special type of ammunition. Each different round is color-coded.

It should be noted that having a striker and being able to use it are not the same thing. Despite treaties allowing agents access to other countries, several of the governments in question won't allow such a powerful weapon into their borders, and many more will gladly confiscate it after allowing it in.

STRIKER BULLET DAMAGE CHART

Type	Diff.	Damage	Range	Rate	Clip
Standard-Issue Bullets	6	6	35	3	16
Silver Bullets	6	6*	35	3	16
Sounders	4	Special**	60	1	8
Tracker Bullets	6	6 (halved)+	35	1	8
Ectoplasmic Bullets	6	5	35	1	6
Rubber Bullets	6	6#	35	3	16

* Causes aggravated damage to most hengevokai.

** Sounders cause eight levels of damage for the purpose of deafening an opponent.

+ Places a tracing unit in the target.

All damage is "temporary" and nonlethal.

CHARACTER TEMPLATES

SHIH WANDERER

Quote: *Nice town you have here. No, I'm just passing through. I noticed the villagers around here are very quiet... is there something I should know about? I don't want to cause any trouble, but if something is wrong, I may be able to help.*

Prelude: Your family was forced to move from its long-time home by the changing politics in China. Everything you'd ever known was taken away from you because the government needed your family's land. Still, your father was very patriotic and the orders were followed without complaint. Three days after the family had relocated, the monsters showed up. Where the bat-faced things came from is anyone's guess, but they decimated most of the village in a few hours. You were one of the lucky ones — they didn't see you in your hiding place under the bed.

But the stranger did. The stranger saw you and told you to stay put while he handled the situation. Four of the demons died before the rest of them flew away into the night. Your father's body was the first sight to greet you when you finally came out of hiding. Your mother and sister were nowhere to be seen, but you couldn't miss what was left of your father. You knew who he was, even though his head was missing.

The stranger let you cry, but he offered you no comfort. While you were mourning, he ransacked the house, stuffing all the small valuables he could find into the pockets of his shabby coat. Then he asked what you wanted to take with you, and he gathered that as well as every scrap of food he could find. When it was all packaged, he forced you to give your father a proper burial. Then he gave you a bundle of your own clothes and took you by the hand.

The years that followed were harsh, but you endured them, suffering his constant criticism all the while. Praise was rare, but every compliment you received was well deserved and fought for. Two weeks ago you met with and killed the last of the demons that killed your father. Of your mother and sister there has been no sign, but you haven't given up hope yet.

The same battle that ended the miserable existence of the bat-things also ended the life of your teacher. Just as he'd taught you, you took the wealth he had in his pockets, the weapons he carried, and the food he'd stashed in his pouch. You also took the time to bury him properly.

Concept: It took 17 years for you to finally become Shih. During that time you've had little contact with other people, and most of the ones you've met were too weak to be any good. You've come to understand that not all *shen* are evil, and you follow the doctrines taught by Yi so many centuries ago, but you don't always like what you do. If not for your mother and sister, you'd consider giving up being a Shih and be perfectly content working for the highest bidder. You know how to fight, and you know how to win. That is enough in many places to guarantee a nice living.

But there's the family to consider. Regardless of all else, you must find them, dead or alive. If they are dead, all *shen* shall pay. If they are alive, the demons are someone else's problem.

Roleplaying Hints: Most of the people around you are weak. They cry in terror when they see a murder, or they allow themselves the luxury of suffering a cold from time to time. You're made of sterner stuff, just as your master taught you to be.

You're brusque and businesslike, being polite only when you find it helpful in gathering information. You don't like the *shen*, and you don't much like other people, either, at least not until they prove to you that they have a little backbone and can fight for themselves. Stay quiet, unless something needs to be said. Answer honestly any questions asked of you, and let someone else worry about hurt feelings. You've got a mission to accomplish, and it's already taken 17 years to get started.

Equipment: staff, sword, demon-braid, surplus hand grenades, assorted pieces of jade, a very battered photograph of you family, two pocketfuls of coins and crumpled bills, three cold egg rolls for emergency rations, a selection of dirty, threadbare clothes in an American GI's duffel bag



DEMON HUNTER

NAME:

NATURE: Curmudgeon

SUPERIOR:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Loner

DUTIES:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: Shih Zanderer

RANK:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength ●●●●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●●●●
Stamina ●●●●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma ●●●●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception ●●●●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●●●●
Wits ●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Acting 00000000
Alertness ●●●●●●●●
Athletics ●●●●●●●●
Brawl 00000000
Dodge ●●●●●●●●
Empathy 00000000
Intimidation ●●●●●●●●
Leadership ●●●●●●●●
Streetwise ●●●●●●●●
Subterfuge 00000000

SKILLS

Animal Ken ●●●●●●●●
Drive ●●●●●●●●
Etiquette 00000000
Firearms ●●●●●●●●
Melee ●●●●●●●●
Martial Arts ●●●●●●●●
Repair ●●●●●●●●
Security 00000000
Stealth 00000000
Survival ●●●●●●●●

KNOWLEDGES

Bureaucracy 00000000
Computer 00000000
Finance 00000000
Investigation 00000000
Law 00000000
Linguistics ●●●●●●●●
Medicine ●●●●●●●●
Occult ●●●●●●●●
Politics 00000000
Science 00000000

ADVANTAGES

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Qiao of the J Shen ●●●●●●●●
Qiao of the Mo Kung ●●●●●●●●
Qiao of the Yu An ●●●●●●●●
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

BACKGROUNDS

Mentor ●●●●●●●●
Contacts ●●●●●●●●
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

VIRTUES

Conscience ●●●●●
Self-Control ●●●●●
Yin Chi □□□□□
Courage ●●●●●
Yang Chi □□□□□

OTHER TRAITS

00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

HUMANITY

●●●●●●●●○○○

WILLPOWER

●●●●●●●●●○
□□□□□□□□□□

P.O

○○○○○○○○○○○○○
□□□□□□□□□□

HEALTH

Bruised □
Hurt -1 □
Injured -1 □
Wounded -2 □
Mauled -2 □
Crippled -5 □
Incapacitated □

WEAKNESS

NEIGHBORHOOD PROTECTOR

Quote: *Old Fong's at it again, huh? Well, I suppose I can go over there and discuss the situation with him, but what's in it for me? What? Of course I want something. I want a lot of things, but a new blanket would do the trick. This one's falling apart, and I'm broke!*

Prelude: Ma Li Long knew just the right words to say to you, just the right promises to make you agree to join her in hunting down the bastards who'd ruined your life. You'd lived all your time in the same area, but you'd always managed to avoid having the tongs come down too hard on you. You'd been completely ignorant of what they were up to, and you'd never expected they'd get to your betrothed, get her involved in drugs and pornography until it melted her soul and killed her innocence. For a long time you just ignored the problem. She said she didn't love you anymore and you let it go at that, too stupid to see that she was suffering, until her body wound up in the harbor.

You stopped working for a better life and began sliding down the same road yourself until the old woman literally knocked some sense into you. She called you a coward, accused you of letting your fiancée get hooked and killed by the worst kind of scum, and demanded that you do right by her memory.

All those years of kung fu training didn't even begin to prepare you for what Ma Li Long put you through. She took you away for a month, teaching you a dozen fighting tricks, making you learn how to move silently, how to focus your anger and dispel your depression.

Then you went with the old woman to gain your revenge on the bastards who'd left your fiancée floating cold and dead in the winter ocean. When it was over there were 10 dead and dying men on the ground, and one Kuei-jin burning to ash in the corner of the warehouse where the tong had kept its contraband. You'd wounded two and killed one. The old lady did the rest. Then she told you about the Kuei-jin, told you about how they like to run things and feed on the very souls of good people.

She asked if you wanted to stop them from causing more harm, and after a few days of contemplation, you said yes. That's when the training really began.

Now it's over. You are finally on your own, ready to defend the people of your neigh-

borhood from their own ignorance. Oh, many of them know that the *shen* exist, but they don't like to think about it. They don't like to see... and that's where you come in. Now you help them when they refuse to help themselves, and if you demand a price for giving them protection, that's only fair. A man has to eat, and a man needs a place to sleep. You've paid the price for your ignorance, now others pay the price for theirs.

Concept: You know the rules of the game, and you make sure everyone else plays by them. In your spare time you continue practicing all that you've learned. Ma Li Long is still your teacher, but her lessons are now more philosophical than physical. You know how to fight, to survive, to win and to judge fairly. She made sure of that before she let you go out on your own.

You treat *shen* with the respect and caution they deserve, but the tongs are fair game. The drugs, the nastiness and the depravity will be driven out of your neighborhood if it takes you the rest of your life.

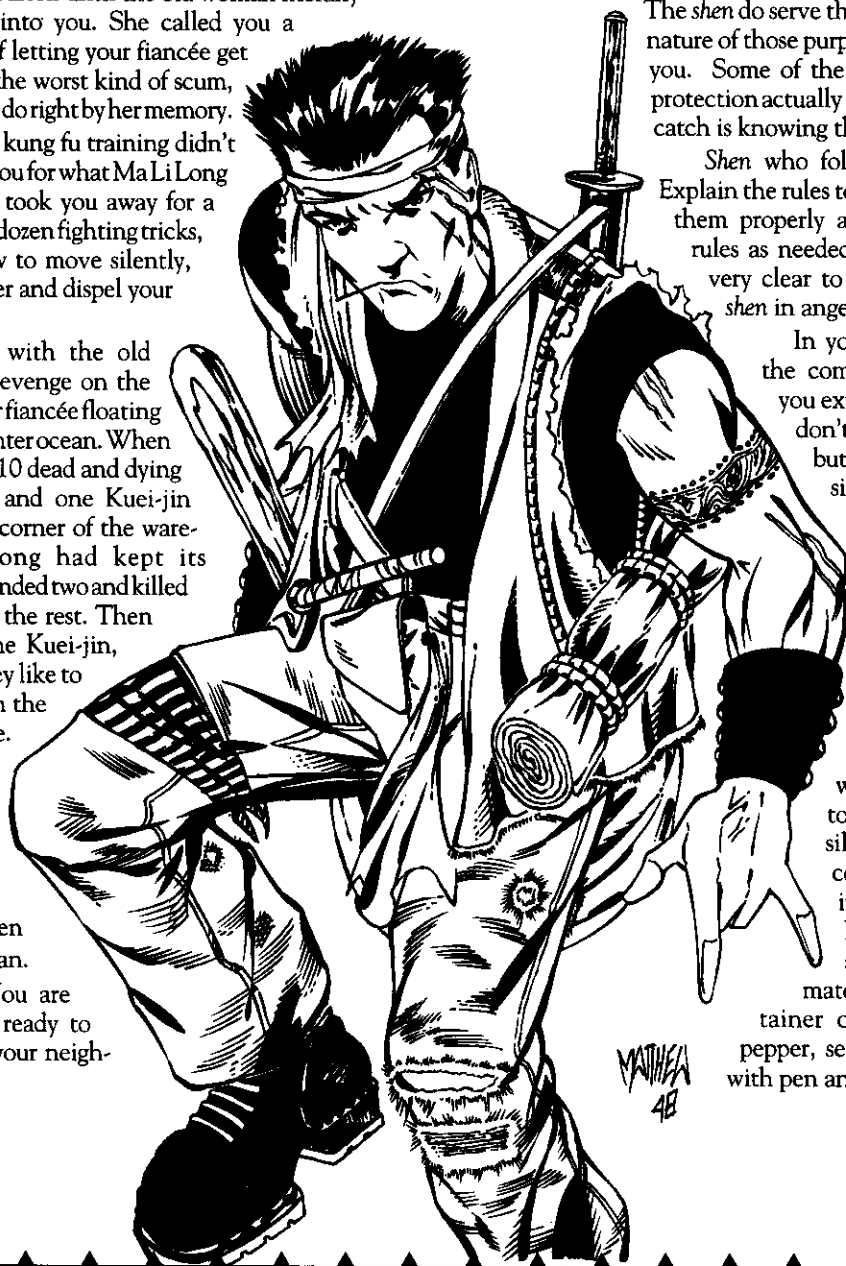
Roleplaying Hints: Be friendly and firm.

The *shen* do serve their purposes, though the nature of those purposes isn't always clear to you. Some of the gangs making offers of protection actually mean what they say. The catch is knowing the difference.

Shen who follow the rules are fine. Explain the rules to those who don't follow them properly and then enforce those rules as needed. Your mentor made it very clear to you that attacking the *shen* in anger is the best way to die.

In your eyes you are serving the community, and in return you expect compensation. You don't expect a yearly income, but you do expect an occasional meal and the respect you feel you've earned. Still, violence is a last resort, and insults aren't enough to get you into a fistfight, unless the insults involve your family or your deceased beloved.

Equipment: bedroll, wooden club, heavy pistol with extra loaded clips, silver-plated balisong, old combat boots with razors imbedded in the toes and heels, brass knuckles, short sword, box of matches, lighter fluid, container of finely ground black pepper, several rolls of rice paper with pen and ink



DEMON HUNTER

NAME:

NATURE: Caregiver

SUPERIOR:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Fanatic

DUTIES:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: Neighborhood Protector RANK:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength ●●●●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●●●●
Stamina ●●●●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma ●●●●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception ●●●●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●●●●
Wits ●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Acting ●●●●●●●●
Alertness ●●●●●●●●
Athletics ●●●●●●●●
Brawl ○○○○○○○○
Dodge ●●●●●●●●
Empathy ●●●●●●●●
Intimidation ●●●●●●●●
Leadership ●●●●●●●●
Streetwise ●●●●●●●●
Subterfuge ●●●●●●●●

SKILLS

Animal Ken ○○○○○○○○
Drive ●●●●●●●●
Etiquette ●●●●●●●●
Firearms ●●●●●●●●
Melee ●●●●●●●●
Martial Arts ●●●●●●●●
Repair ●●●●●●●●
Security ○○○○○○○○
Stealth ○○○○○○○○
Survival ●●●●●●●●

KNOWLEDGES

Bureaucracy ○○○○○○○○
Computer ○○○○○○○○
Finance ○○○○○○○○
Investigation ○○○○○○○○
Law ●●●●●●●●
Linguistics ●●●●●●●●
Medicine ○○○○○○○○
Occult ●●●●●●●●
Politics ○○○○○○○○
Science ○○○○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

SPECIAL ABILITIES

Plan of the J Shen ●●●●●●●●
Plan of the Mo Kung ●●●●●●●●
Plan of the Yu An ●●●●●●●●
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○

BACKGROUNDS

Mentor ●●●●●●●●
Contacts ●●●●●●●●
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○

VIRTUES

Conscience ●●●●●
Self-Control ●●●●●
Yin Chi □□□□□
Courage ●●●●●
Yang Chi □□□□□

OTHER TRAITS

○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○
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○○○○○○○○
○○○○○○○○

HUMANITY

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

P/O

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

HEALTH

Bruised □
Hurt -1 □
Injured -1 □
Wounded -2 □
Mauled -2 □
Crippled -5 □
Incapacitated □

WEAKNESS

SFO PARAPSYCHOLOGIST

Quote: *The secret to finding the answers to any question simply involves knowing where to look. With the demons, knowing where to look is as much a matter of luck as it is a matter of skill. Fortunately, I'm a very lucky person.*

Prelude: You always suspected there were other powers at work in the world. Aside from a love of practical jokes, your overriding passion was always the desire to know exactly what lies in the darkness between the neon lights. In an effort to prove yourself right, you studied computers, Latin and mythology with an equal zeal. The computer skills earned you a job at DTI, but your other passions earned you the notice of Geichin Okamoto. You thought you were about to get fired when the old man discovered you'd been researching unexplained phenomena on company time, but instead he looked over what you'd found, spent an hour asking you

questions about your obsession with the supernatural, and made you an offer.

Now you can hack into almost any system with ease, and the library of information available to you has put your meager collection of antique tomes to shame. You've begun to understand the societal connections the Hungry Dead have in modern-day Japan — at least you think you do — but the studies have only just started. Next project: Learning the finer details of vivisection.

Concept: You live to solve mysteries. There's an entire world of information to be discovered, and for the first time in your life you have the skills, the financial backing, and the proper tools to really learn the secrets waiting to be revealed.

The burning mysteries of the universe are waiting, and as long as you behave yourself, you've got a means to get the answers. Behaving isn't even that hard, because SFO keeps you too busy doing what you've always wanted for your practical jokes to get out of hand. For now, at least.

Roleplaying Hints: Always remember that the first job is solving the puzzles. That's the important part. The jokes can wait, but the chance to study captured demons is too important. It's depressing when the trails you've been studying lead only to another group of humans, but that's okay. Now and then you get lucky and a real monster turns up. Play by the rules and you get everything you wanted. But, if no one finds out who's responsible for the itching powder in the vents, maybe you can have a little fun too.

Equipment: laptop computer, several Japanese translation dictionaries, a dozen outfits for infiltrating any group on any financial level, lockpicks, bribery money, joy buzzer, striker gun, spare disks, encryption decoder



DEMON HUNTER



NAME:

NATURE: Jester

SUPERIOR:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Visionary

DUTIES:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: SFO Parapsychologist

RANK:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength ●●●●●●●●
Dexterity ●●●●●●●●
Stamina ●●●●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma ●●●●●●●●
Manipulation ●●●●●●●●
Appearance ●●●●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception ●●●●●●●●
Intelligence ●●●●●●●●
Wits ●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Acting 00000000
Alertness ●●●●●●●●
Athletics 00000000
Brawl ●●●●●●●●
Dodge ●●●●●●●●
Empathy ●●●●●●●●
Intimidation 00000000
Leadership ●●●●●●●●
Streetwise 00000000
Subterfuge ●●●●●●●●

SKILLS

Animal Ken 00000000
Drive ●●●●●●●●
Etiquette ●●●●●●●●
Firearms ●●●●●●●●
Melee 00000000
Music ●●●●●●●●
Repair 00000000
Security 00000000
Stealth ●●●●●●●●
Survival 00000000

KNOWLEDGES

Bureaucracy ●●●●●●●●
Computer ●●●●●●●●
Finance 00000000
Investigation ●●●●●●●●
Law 00000000
Linguistics 00000000
Medicine ●●●●●●●●
Occult ●●●●●●●●
Politics 00000000
Science ●●●●●●●●

ADVANTAGES

SPECIAL ABILITIES

00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

BACKGROUNDS

Backers ●●●●●●●●
Resources ●●●●●●●●
Contacts ●●●●●●●●
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

VIRTUES

Conscience ●●●●●●
Self-Control ●●●●●●
Yin Chi □□□□□□
Courage ●●●●●●
Yang Chi □□□□□□

OTHER TRAITS

Emotion Suppressors 00000000
Psi-Band Radio 00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000
00000000

HUMANITY

●●●●●●●●○○○○

WILLPOWER

●●●●●●●●○○○○
□□□□□□□□□□

P/O

○○○○○○○○○○○○○○
□□□□□□□□□□

HEALTH

Bruised □
Hurt -1 □
Injured -1 □
Wounded -2 □
Mauled -2 □
Crippled -5 □
Incapacitated □

WEAKNESS

SFO ASSASSIN

Quote: *No, I don't think we've met. I just have that kind of face.*

Prelude: The Yakuza was good to you. You had money, influence, a dozen lovers to choose from, even a Platinum Card. It would have been a perfect job if not for the disciplinary problems. You got too cocky, and you're the first one to admit it.

You didn't know the blonde from a week before was an American reporter. You certainly never expected an inquisitive brain behind those baby-blue eyes. Too much sake, too much dancing, and the next thing you know, you're being quoted in an American paper about the sorts of things you've done for the Yakuza over the years.

Most of those tasks weren't the type the Yakuza wanted mentioned. Before you knew what was happening, the cops were breaking down the door and you were about to take a trip to the sort of place you swore you'd never visit. To make matters worse, even if the law let you go, there was no way in hell the Yakuza would forgive your transgressions.

Then Okamoto came along and gave you a simple offer: Work for the Strike Force and get a new identity, or face the consequences of your actions. Not much of a choice, really.

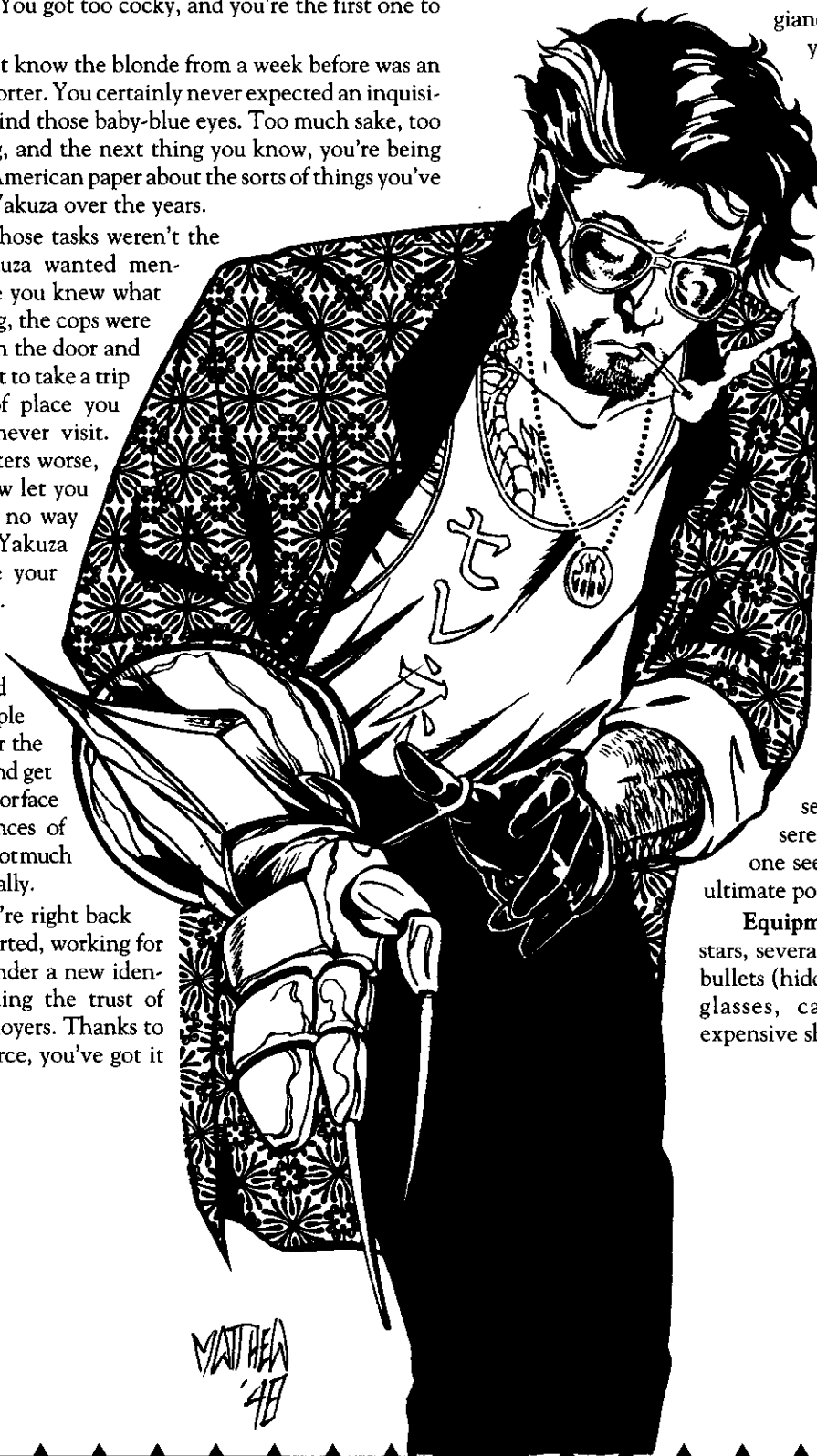
Now you're right back where you started, working for the Yakuza under a new identity and gaining the trust of your old employers. Thanks to the Strike Force, you've got it

all again and, as an added bonus, you've got a whole new life. This time around you plan to play the game a lot more carefully.

Concept: You never want to get caught by anyone again. You just want to live the good life, even if the entire thing is an illusion. When it comes to loyalty, there's no doubt about who gets your allegiance: Strike Force Zero is your family now, and always will be, because they hold all the cards and because they saved you from your own stupidity. Besides that, for the first time since you were a kid, you don't feel you're dishonoring the memory of your father. Perhaps the old man would even be proud, if he could see you. You don't like to admit to the feelings you have about the traditional values, but they are there just the same.

Roleplaying Hints: Nobody, absolutely nobody, ever gets to see inside of you. You wear your new face like the Kabuki Mask hidden under the skin, a tool to reveal only what you want to let people see. Your smile is always serene, and you never let anyone see you sweat. Yours is the ultimate poker face.

Equipment: garrote, throwing stars, several knives, striker gun and bullets (hidden in your sheath), sunglasses, casual business attire, expensive shoes, fast car



DEMON HUNTER

NAME:

NATURE: Traditionalist

SUPERIOR:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR: Gallant

DUTIES:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT: The Assassin

RANK:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength _____ ●●●●●●●●
Dexterity _____ ●●●●●●●●
Stamina _____ ●●●●●●●●

SOCIAL

Charisma _____ ●●●●●●●●
Manipulation _____ ●●●●●●●●
Appearance _____ ●●●●●●●●

MENTAL

Perception _____ ●●●●●●●●
Intelligence _____ ●●●●●●●●
Wits _____ ●●●●●●●●

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Acting _____ 00000000
Alertness _____ 00000000
Athletics _____ ●0000000
Brawl _____ ●●●●0000
Dodge _____ ●●●●0000
Empathy _____ 00000000
Intimidation _____ ●●●●0000
Leadership _____ ●0000000
Streetwise _____ ●●●●0000
Subterfuge _____ ●0000000

SKILLS

Animal Ken _____ 00000000
Drive _____ ●●000000
Etiquette _____ ●0000000
Firearms _____ ●●●●0000
Melee _____ ●●●●0000
Martial Arts _____ 00000000
Repair _____ 00000000
Security _____ 00000000
Stealth _____ ●0000000
Survival _____ 00000000

KNOWLEDGES

Bureaucracy _____ 00000000
Computer _____ 00000000
Finance _____ ●●000000
Investigation _____ 00000000
Law _____ 00000000
Linguistics _____ 00000000
Medicine _____ ●0000000
Occult _____ ●0000000
Politics _____ ●0000000
Science _____ 00000000

ADVANTAGES

SPECIAL ABILITIES

_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000

BACKGROUNDS

Backers _____ ●●●●0000
Resources _____ ●●●●0000
Contacts _____ ●●●●0000
Favors _____ ●●000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000

VIRTUES

Conscience _____ ●●●●●
Self-Control _____ ●●●●●
Yin Chi _____ □□□□□
Courage _____ ●●●●●
Yang Chi _____ □□□□□

OTHER TRAITS

Kabuki Mask _____ 00000000
Sheath _____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000
_____ 00000000

HUMANITY

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

WILLPOWER

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

P/O

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

HEALTH

Bruised _____ □
Hurt _____ -1 □
Injured _____ -1 □
Wounded _____ -2 □
Mauled _____ -2 □
Crippled _____ -5 □
Incapacitated _____ □

WEAKNESS

DEMON HUNTER

NAME:

NATURE:

SUPERIOR:

PLAYER:

DEMEANOR:

DUTIES:

CHRONICLE:

CONCEPT:

RANK:

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL

Strength _____ ●○○○○○○○
Dexterity _____ ●○○○○○○○
Stamina _____ ●○○○○○○○

SOCIAL

Charisma _____ ●○○○○○○○
Manipulation _____ ●○○○○○○○
Appearance _____ ●○○○○○○○

MENTAL

Perception _____ ●○○○○○○○
Intelligence _____ ●○○○○○○○
Wits _____ ●○○○○○○○

ABILITIES

TALENTS

Acting _____ ○○○○○○○○
Alertness _____ ○○○○○○○○
Athletics _____ ○○○○○○○○
Brawl _____ ○○○○○○○○
Dodge _____ ○○○○○○○○
Empathy _____ ○○○○○○○○
Intimidation _____ ○○○○○○○○
Leadership _____ ○○○○○○○○
Streetwise _____ ○○○○○○○○
Subterfuge _____ ○○○○○○○○

SKILLS

Animal Ken _____ ○○○○○○○○
Drive _____ ○○○○○○○○
Etiquette _____ ○○○○○○○○
Firearms _____ ○○○○○○○○
Melee _____ ○○○○○○○○
Martial Arts _____ ○○○○○○○○
Repair _____ ○○○○○○○○
Security _____ ○○○○○○○○
Stealth _____ ○○○○○○○○
Survival _____ ○○○○○○○○

KNOWLEDGES

Bureaucracy _____ ○○○○○○○○
Computer _____ ○○○○○○○○
Finance _____ ○○○○○○○○
Investigation _____ ○○○○○○○○
Law _____ ○○○○○○○○
Linguistics _____ ○○○○○○○○
Medicine _____ ○○○○○○○○
Occult _____ ○○○○○○○○
Politics _____ ○○○○○○○○
Science _____ ○○○○○○○○

ADVANTAGES

SPECIAL ABILITIES

_____ ●○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○

BACKGROUNDS

_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○

VIRTUES

Conscience _____ ●○○○○○
Self-Control _____ ○○○○○○
Yin Chi _____ □□□□□
Courage _____ ○○○○○○
Yang Chi _____ □□□□□

OTHER TRAITS

_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○
_____ ○○○○○○○○

HUMANITY

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

WILLPOWER

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

P/O

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

HEALTH

Bruised _____ □
Hurt _____ -1 □
Injured _____ -1 □
Wounded _____ -2 □
Mauled _____ -2 □
Crippled _____ -5 □
Incapacitated _____ □

WEAKNESS